

ISUNA HASEKURA

SPICE
&
WOLF

VOL. 21

Spring Log IV

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SPICE & WOLF

Vol. 21

SPRING LOG IV

BY ISUNA HASEKURA
ILLUSTRATED BY JYUU AYAKURA





THE HEAD CHEF
HANNA

THE KINDHEARTED
WOLF AVATAR WORKING
IN THE BATHHOUSE
SELIM

BEYOND THE
STEAM AND WOLF

“TH-THANK YOU...”

THE MIXTURE WAS MUCH LIKE A DRINK GIVEN TO SICK
CHILDREN, BUT IT WAS ALSO UNDOUBTEDLY NUTRITIOUS.

AND ITS SWEET AROMA EASED HER TENSE THROAT.

“YOU’VE BEEN OUT OF SORTS FOR A WHILE NOW.”

HANNA SPOKE WITH A TIRED SMILE AS SELIM SIPPED
THE SWEET, RICH GOAT’S MILK.



SPICE AND WOLF
BATHHOUSE MASTER
LAWRENCE

THE EGGS OF A JOURNEY AND WOLF

“GOD FORBIDS FORTUNE-TELLING.

AND GAMBLING IS NOTHING MORE THAN
FORTUNE-TELLING.”

STANDING THERE IN THE EXCHANGE, WHERE
GREAT SUMS OF MONEY AND GREED FLEW BACK
AND FORTH, WERE SEVERAL PEOPLE WHO SEEMED
COMPLETELY OUT OF PLACE.

THEY WERE PRIESTS, CLAD IN CLERICAL ROBES.



THE DAUGHTER OF
THE WISEWOLF AND
THE MERCHANT
MYURI

ANOTHER BIRTHDAY AND WOLF

THIS IS A STORY OF WHEN
TWO BEAUTIFUL WOLVES
STILL LIVED DEEP IN THE
STEAM-FILLED MOUNTAINS
OF NYOHHIRA...

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SPICE & WOLF

VOLUME XXI
SPRING LOG IV

ISUNA HASEKURA
JYUU AYAKURA


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SPICE AND WOLF, Volume 21

ISUNA HASEKURA

Translation by Jasmine Bernhardt Cover art by Jyuu Ayakura

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OOKAMI TO KOSHINRYO Vol. 21

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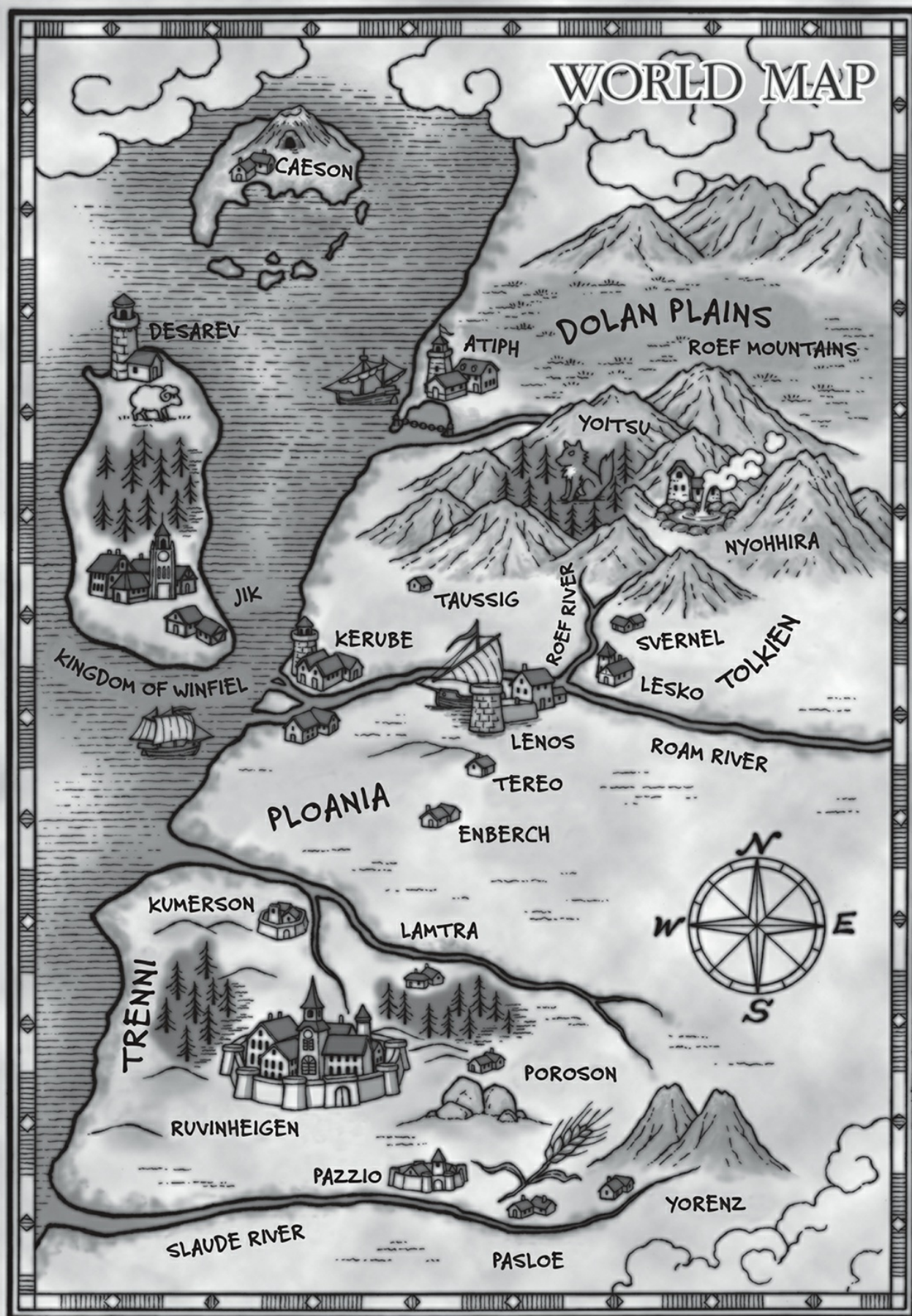
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Map Illustration: Hidetada Idemitsu

BEYOND THE
STEAM AND
WOLF



BEYOND THE STEAM AND WOLF

Like a sharp ax stroke, she woke with a start.

The rapid heartbeats she felt while still under the covers were likely the traces of some sort of nightmare. This had been going on for a few days now.

Selim stared at the ceiling, breathing slowly. Then she closed her eyes. *You can relax here*, she told herself. She was sleeping in a room that had a real roof, nestled in a bed with proper linens that bugs wouldn't crawl out from. The blankets were soft and warm. A faint, sweet smell clung to them, perhaps from perfumed oil. It was a blessed environment that would've been unthinkable during her long journey.

Through an odd bond, she had ended up living here in the hot spring village of Nyohhira at the end of her wanderings that had started in the south. The fact that she had managed to get a job at one of the more respected bathhouses, Spice and Wolf, wasn't so much good luck as it was a small miracle.

That was why when she first started working at the bathhouse, she only ever had nightmares. They were the sort of dreams where she'd do something like sneak into the storage shed of a village she'd found during her travels, hoping to finally catch a wink of sleep, only to find herself engulfed in flames instead.

Haunted by her fears and unable to believe her good fortune, Selim had continued to brace herself, suspecting that everything would come crashing down sooner or later.

That all stopped when the cold part of the year in Nyohhira, which dragged on and on in the far reaches of the northlands, finally gave way to the greener season of renewal.

If asked whether her work was tough, Selim would say it was certainly not easy, but neither was it harsh. She had taken jobs in the past from the merchant companies of large cities, the farming villages out in the countryside, and the

noble villas established in bucolic lands. Working in a bathhouse was like a combination of all three.

It was like a company in that so many people came and went and the business's stock often reached astronomical numbers; the resemblance to a farming village was due to how they often procured, cooked, processed, and stored most of their meat, fish, and vegetables, usually in preparation for the coming season, and how they typically covered the costs of building maintenance by themselves as well; on the other hand, the similarity to a noble's villa was due to the bathhouse's need to be furnished with a certain degree of formality in order to properly receive its guests. There were so many different things the staff had to do, and there was no end to it, like counting all the grains of sand in the desert.

That being said, Selim was never struck by anyone while they yelled at her to work more, nor was she ever condescendingly handed a piece of moldy bread after a day of grueling hard labor. Even if she made a mistake in her work, her kind boss never got mad but instead investigated what caused the mistake in the first place and even improved her working conditions based on what he figured out.

Selim turned over onto her side, and when she shifted her gaze to the desk beside her, there she saw further proof of her boss's intelligence and kindness. A round, polished piece of curved glass glinted as it caught the moonlight filtering through a small gap in the window. It was part of a device called spectacles—carefully shaped pieces of glass that let her clearly see even the smallest of writing once she wore them over her eyes.

She had had no idea that her eyesight was not as good as others'. All this time, she had simply assumed that she ran into things, often mistook objects, and wrote words incorrectly because she was dim-witted.

When her boss and bathhouse owner Lawrence first handed the spectacles to her, she had been so happy and excited that she spent the whole night reading under the moonlight.

The night Selim received the spectacles was the same night she first wished she could work in this bathhouse forever. The exact moment was when she

peered up at the golden moon through the lenses.

But...

Selim closed her eyes and sighed. She had been feeling down as of late.

Her dreams were becoming horrible ordeals again. To be specific, she had started having a different sort of nightmares from the ones she had before.

“Phew...”

Selim was fed up with her own weakness. She was sure that if her older brother saw her like this, he would no doubt scold her.

But... Selim wanted to make excuses. She buried her face in her pillow and squeezed it tight. She tried to stamp out her unease that way, but of course it didn't work.

As she continued doing her best to quiet her troubled heart, through her window, she heard footsteps and a bucket being tossed into a well.

It seemed like the first one to get up was the head of the kitchen—Hanna.

Simply preparing breakfast and making preliminary arrangements for serving the food for the rest of the day was a massive undertaking. Selim had to help her.

Just as she was about to sit up and leave her bed, she buried her face in the pillow and sighed into it one last time.

Once she had completely expelled every last bit of breath, Selim lifted her head and rose in resignation.

Today was the start of another day.

Morning duties included drawing water, cleaning, and kindling the fires—plus, bread making happened every other day when there were guests in the bathhouse and every four days during the off-seasons.

Selim had kneaded some dough, let it rest, and then headed off to the village's communal bread oven to bake the bread once the sun began to rise.

Anyone who wanted to bake bread usually brought just enough kindling to bake their own portions, but the oven would be cool at the start of the day, so

whoever went first had to bring extra fuel. Anyone arriving afterward would not need as much, since the oven would already be warm. That was why the villagers drew straws to determine the order.

Of course, her boss and bathhouse owner Lawrence would never be angry with her for drawing the short stick. While that was not specifically the reason, Selim always preferred to go first. The reason was that the crowd that gathered around the oven was made up of village women who loved to gossip and pry.

Selim, who had appeared out of nowhere near the end of winter, was a prime target for them.

And Spice and Wolf was home to an inexhaustible number of other topics.

“I’m back.”

She had drawn a reasonable number that let her go fourth, but she had still been exposed to probing arrows while she waited for her bread to bake. By the time Selim returned to the kitchen, she had been gone long enough that it was well into morning and she was thoroughly worn out.

When she placed the basket filled with fresh bread onto the kitchen counter, the stout woman stirring the pot with a ladle, Hanna, glanced over at her.

“Why, hello. Good work out there.”

Hanna peeled back the cloth over the basket and nodded, satisfied. Selim was relieved to see that she had baked the bread to perfection this time as well. Her nose was better than the average person’s, so she could generally tell what was going on in the oven without looking. The only reason she would ever burn the bread would be because she lacked the skill and was too slow to take it out of the oven.

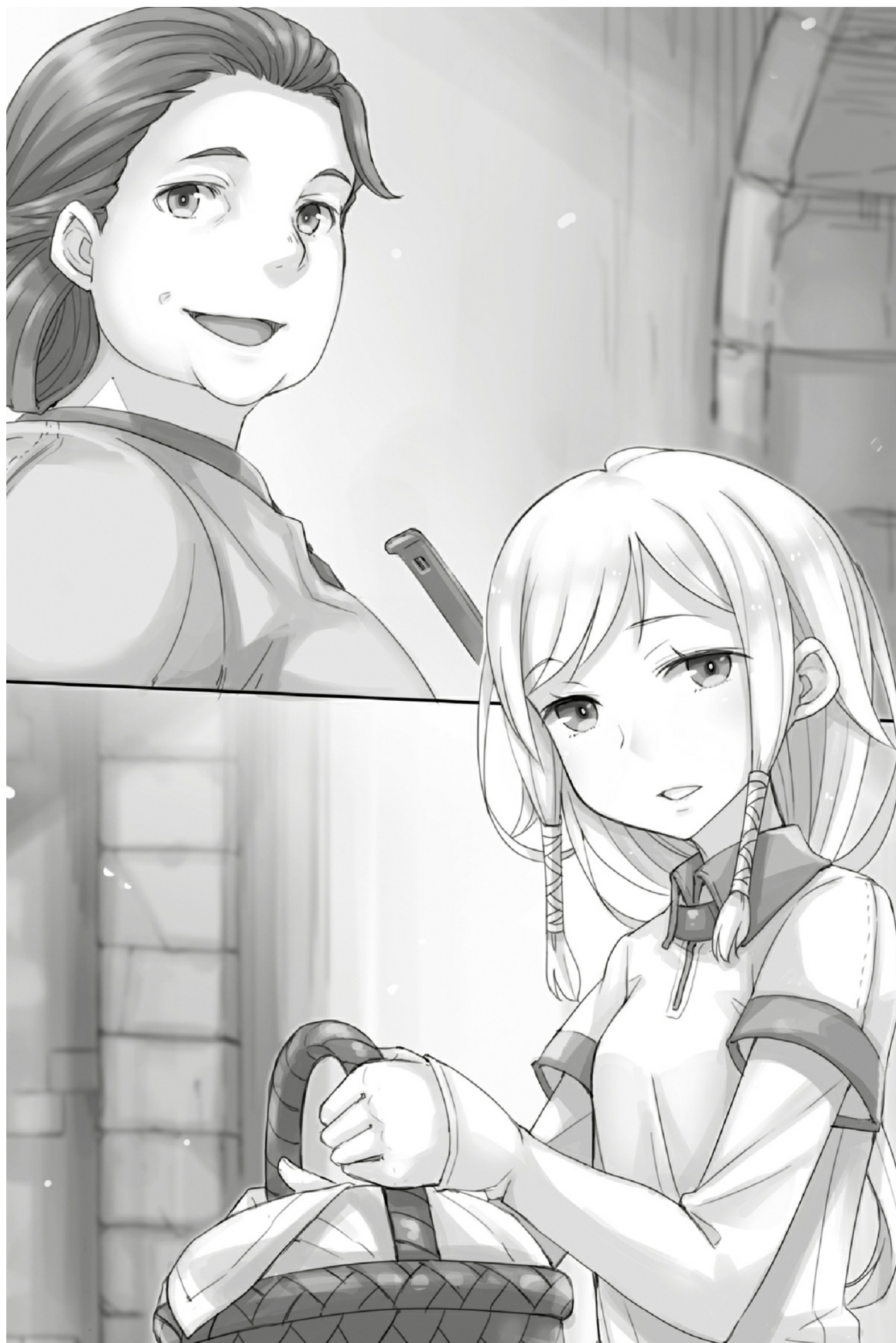
“I’m always impressed, Miss Wolf. It’s not undercooked, and it’s not too brown. We could put you to work in a bakery right away.”

“Only if I’m seeing to the timing of when to take the bread out of the oven. I might be able to keep track of baking by the scent, but I haven’t the strength to knead so much dough,” Selim said with a troubled smile, and Hanna returned it with a grin of her own.

At a glance, Selim seemed like any other young woman in the village, but that was an illusion.

Her true form was a white wolf, a resident of the forest who would live longer than any human.

“Right. You need to put on a little more weight, Selim. Your breakfast is there.”



Selim's arm probably was not even half as thick as Hanna's.

There was plenty of work in the bathhouse that involved manual labor, and if possible, she wanted to be sturdier for those duties.

That being said, Selim wasn't much of a big eater, either because she had spent a long time on the road subsisting on the bare minimum or because that was her natural preference. She usually didn't have much of an appetite in the morning, either. Still, sitting on the kitchen table was some bread made of wheat and rye accompanying a serving of vegetable soup and some salted meat.

Selim brought over a chair and grabbed a spoon—Hanna had gone through the trouble of cooking, after all, and eating properly could be considered part of her job—but then she stopped.

As she thought about how she needed to eat quickly and move on to her work for the day, a hand reached out to her from behind.

"I mixed boiled goat's milk with wine, then stirred in some honey and breadcrumbs. You'd prefer that, right?"

Selim turned around; it was Hanna.

"Th-thank you..."

The mixture was much like a drink given to sick children, but it was also undoubtedly nutritious.

And its sweet aroma eased her tense throat.

"You've been out of sorts for a while now."

Hanna spoke with a tired smile as Selim sipped the sweet, rich goat's milk.

Selim unconsciously tensed her shoulders, and Hanna laughed, shaking with mirth.

"I'm not criticizing you. You're diligent, Selim. You think too much sometimes."

Hanna put her hands on her hips and emitted a tired sigh.

Today was not the first day that Hanna had been worried about her.

“But...”

As Selim was about to speak, two people noisily entered the kitchen. One was a tall and lanky young man and the other a short and stout middle-aged man. The first held a sieve filled with vegetables gathered from the mountain and the second, a basket filled with beans. It was clear they had been preparing ingredients.

“Miss Hanna, we finished bringing in the vegetables and shelling the beans... Oh, good morning, Miss Selim.”

“G-good morning...”

With the wooden bowl of goat’s milk in hand, Selim shrank down and slinked toward a corner of the kitchen.

“Wow, the bread smells great.”

As the shorter man idly commented on the aroma, the taller one promptly put away the sieve and basket they had carried in.

“Miss Hanna, what should we do next? We turned the cheese over earlier and scrubbed the surface with salt water. The cider cooled overnight, so maybe we should leave it by the fireside for a while.”

“Thanks, you two. Maybe I’ll have you make some jerky for the owners,” Hanna responded magnanimously and retrieved a large blade from a shelf.

Selim watched nervously, but Hanna spoke boldly.

“Or are you going to run away crying?”

Her provocative grin suited the stout woman well.

The two men who had come to the kitchen exchanged glances and smiled wryly.

“No, ma’am, of course not. There certainly was a time when I was new to it, though.”

“Ha-ha-ha, you make it sound like you’ve been thoroughly seasoned by the world.”

“What are you trying to say, hmm?”

As the two men casually traded banter, they took armfuls of deer meat and the large knife out the back of the kitchen.

After seeing them off, Hanna turned around to Selim.

“That’s the right attitude to have, if you ask me. I’m pretty sure they wouldn’t want any unnecessary concern, either.”

“...”

Selim looked up at Hanna with wide, rounded eyes but, in the end, dropped her gaze back down to the bowl in her hand.

That pair from earlier was one of the reasons why she had been feeling down lately.

It wasn’t that she particularly disliked them or anything. She simply was not sure how she should interact with them.

That was because Selim was the embodiment of a wolf, and they were the embodiments of a rabbit and a sheep.

“I might be a bird who’s fine with only nuts and fruits for my meals, but I won’t lose to the mistress when it comes to food.”

The proud Hanna also wasn’t human and neither was the bathhouse master Lawrence’s wife, Holo. She was a wolf, much like Selim, and she had once been known as the wisewolf, a legendary being with a massive, towering stature brimming with dignity. Selim owed her a great debt, and since Holo and her husband asked for nothing in return, Selim decided she would have worked for them until her body was ground into dust, even if Holo had been a mouse.

Still, there was no doubt that Selim found comfort in both of them being wolves.

Then eight other nonhumans came along.

At first, they simply visited the bathhouse as guests—but for some reason would end up helping out for a little while. Yet, they were all horses, rabbits, sheep, and birds—all people who ate greens, nuts, berries.

More than just being a wolf, there were plenty of other ways Selim found herself incompatible with the others. For one thing, they did not eat meat

during meals, yet she, Holo, and the master, Lawrence, ate their kin.

She knew that these people were well traveled and worldly. They would not be shocked or resent others for such a thing. Otherwise, they never would've come to the bathhouse where Holo the Wisewolf was rumored to be in the first place.

In which case, asking them to make meat jerky and handing over an ax as Hanna had done shouldn't have been any different from asking for fish jerky.

Of course, it wasn't like Selim didn't want to work with them. As a rule, bathhouses were busy, and it was dizzying when guests were visiting during the summer. The coming winter would be peak season here in Nyohhira, too. If anything, she was thankful for the extra sets of helping hands.

However, the reason Selim shrugged in front of Hanna was because of something else.

"Well, I guess you don't exactly look like someone who's got a knack for giving orders."

When Hanna smiled wryly, Selim sighed. It was the same as all the other things that followed her to bed. She had completely forgotten about the contents of the bowl she was still holding while murmuring quietly.

"What are Lady Holo and Mr. Lawrence thinking...?"

It went without saying that she adored Holo and Lawrence. They had saved her when she was just about to be turned adrift from lack of planning and bad luck after coming all the way north on nothing but a faint sliver of hope. And even if they had not, their personalities were enough for her to love them on their own merits.

However, perhaps it was because they had lived a real fairy tale—a human merchant and wisewolf went on an epic journey, hand in hand, and came to open a bathhouse here in the northlands in the end. There was something fantastical about them, and they had announced something so far-fetched and out of the blue one day.

"How could they leave me in charge of the bathhouse...? Where will we be after just a single month, never mind six...?"

That was the reason why Selim barely ate, kept having nightmares, and did nothing but sigh as of late.

One morning, after Selim had woken up, ready to work hard to serve her bosses, Holo had informed her of a change.

“Listen, we shall be leaving on a journey until spring or summer next year. Will you run the bathhouse for us while we are away? Not to worry—you will have eight new pairs of hands to help!”

The very ones who saved Selim and her companions after they all drifted north were none other than Holo and Lawrence.

She couldn't say no to any request of theirs.

“Well, I guess it would be a shock for anyone, suddenly being told you're in charge of a bathhouse. Those two live in their own fairy tale, after all.” Hanna's words were a slight comfort. This was her way of being considerate. “Still, they're leaving you in charge because from their perspective, there's no problem. Sir Lawrence is a merchant who's mastered the ways of the human world, and Lady Holo goes without saying—she's the wisewolf. Of course, she acts cute in front of Sir Lawrence, but...she's sharp. They're not the kind to ask for anything unreasonable.”

Logically, Selim understood what Hanna was saying.

She was probably right.

But there was something she could not quite swallow.

“But I just can't shake the feeling that they have the wrong idea...that they're overestimating me...”

“Really? I don't think it can be considered anything less than good fortune that you've started working here.”

Selim looked to Hanna, who shrugged and started counting with her fingers.

“Look, you work from dawn till dusk without complaint, rarely taking breaks. Moreover, you can read and write. Even work involving numbers can be trusted to you. That's not something I can do. I can't count past ten.”

Selim doubted that was true, but Hanna never budged from the kitchen, so

perhaps she had the temperament of an artisan who wanted to focus on only one thing.

“Plus, you settled in as Col’s replacement in the blink of an eye, taking over all that difficult writing stuff, no?”

Selim did not know Col personally, but she could tell by the neat writings he left behind that he was methodical, capable, and likely a very kind young man.

“That’s...only because they generously taught me how to do bookkeeping and put in orders...”

“No, no, you heard how Col was. He was a pushover when it came to both Lady Holo and young Myuri. They sometimes made him add unnecessary extras to our orders. Their things used to occupy a whole shelf here in the kitchen just to keep them hidden from Sir Lawrence, and boy, did that bug me. All of that came to a grinding halt when you took charge, Miss Selim.”

Selim had never met Lawrence and Holo’s only daughter, Myuri. From the stories she heard, Myuri seemed to be a wolf pup in her prime as a prankster, but that just went to show she was truly Holo’s daughter.

To Selim’s understanding, once she had taken charge of the books, all that sly business came to an end. Since Selim was a fellow wolf, there were appearances that had to be upheld.

“And to top it all off, you can make candles. You can do the mending. You know how to handle cheese, and you can brew liquor.”

“We lived with meager means while constantly on the move, so that’s all just...”

“What’re you talking about? I sometimes chat with the cooks in the other bathhouses, and they’re all full of chumps who won’t even peel a single onion.”

Is that how it is?

Selim was weak, so she tried to compensate by working as hard as she could, all so she wouldn’t be a burden on her older brother and the others.

She had never considered it extraordinary, so to be complimented for it was like listening to fish talk at the bottom of a lake.

“Anyway, those two figured that the bathhouse would be fine in your hands, Miss Selim.”

“Sigh...”

Selim was still not convinced, doubting she would be able to keep the bathhouse running properly.

Most of the people she would be giving orders to were basically strangers to her. Worse, none of them ate meat. And even if she was technically more familiar with the bathhouse than they were, she had been here only six months longer, at most. And as if that wasn't enough, she still had no experience with the approaching height of winter season, which was arguably the busiest time of year.

Selim was beside herself with doubt, but when she heard Hanna's heavy sigh, she lifted her head.

What she found was a kind but troubled smile.

“I guess the question is if you can gain some confidence...Let me tell you something fun.”

“Fun?”

An impish grin spread across Hanna's face.

“I said they're living in their own fairy tale, didn't I? Even if the bathhouse is a total mess when they come back from their trip, I doubt they would mind much.”

“What?”

Selim's eyes widened, and Hanna shrugged.

“What you're worried about is whether you can take charge, keep the bathhouse running, and keep everything nice until they come back, right? I don't think you need to worry too much about it.”

“B-but that's—”

“That's what I think after watching them for over a decade...But I guess you'll just have to see it with your own eyes, too.”

Selim was skeptical of Hanna's claims. That was because while Hanna was reliable, her personality seemed to give rise to a tendency to not bother with minor details. Hanna appeared to be the type of person who would thrive no matter where or how she lived. The look on Hanna's face made it clear that she could tell how Selim saw her.

"Pretend you're being duped and take a look at those two from that perspective. Besides, they're in the middle of preparing for a journey. I think you'll understand what I want to say."

"..."

Selim still wasn't convinced, but Hanna clapped her hands, almost like she was signaling that the conversation was over.

"Well, then, finish your soup and hurry back to work. The bosses are getting ready to depart, and we need to teach the greenhorns their jobs. We have to start making arrangements for winter soon, too."

Right—Selim remembered her duties and snapped back to reality.

She still harbored a great many questions and worries in her heart, but she washed them all down with the goat's milk in her bowl.

The sweet, warm drink was easy to finish, settling comfortably in her stomach.

"Th-thank you for the meal."

She could feel it rising slightly, deep in her throat, since she had quaffed it all at once.

"Don't mention it. Good luck with work today."

Hanna would make lunch out of the untouched breakfast.

As Selim threw herself into her daily tasks, she thought in the corner of her mind about what Hanna had told her.

"Keep an eye on those two and you'll see—" What exactly did she mean by that?

Selim turned the thought over in her mind as she rubbed her stomach, full

from swallowing so much at once.

Then she burped because she had yet to fully digest her concerns.

It wasn't exactly a secret that the owners of Spice and Wolf were going on a trip.

This was particularly true for Lawrence who, as a newcomer to the village, had to relay the news of their departure ahead of time because he wouldn't be able to fulfill any village obligations while he was away.

He brought Selim along to the village warehouse that also served as the meeting hall to introduce her to the rest of the bathhouse owners as Spice and Wolf's interim caretaker.

During her time on the road, Selim had gotten used to stares of contempt and suspicion that openly said, *What can this little girl even do?* That was because the only way she often managed to get work was by claiming she was an old hand at jobs she had never done before or by promising that she could do things that by all rights should've been impossible for her.

Yet, she was more aware than the other bathhouse owners could ever possibly be that there was no way she could ever fill Lawrence's shoes.

Despite Selim's certainty in this, Lawrence seemed to be completely unconcerned, and once she had been formally introduced, there was no going back. And, possibly thanks to Lawrence's daily conduct, several bathhouse owners had voiced their sympathies and offered to assist Selim.

Though this was certainly not the first time she had to steel herself for an unavoidable task, Selim was feeling far tenser now than the various times her life had been in danger. She prayed that Lawrence and Holo's journey would be delayed for just another day and that they would come home even one day earlier.

But the world never worked the way people wanted it to.

"Thirty silver suns from Mr. Henri, five gold *lumione* and twenty-three silver *trenni* from Mr. Dudley..."

Lawrence sat beside Selim at the accounting desk, reading information out

loud as she wrote it down on paper.

The spacious desk was currently covered in items, and the pair sitting there were similarly getting buried by the amount of information that needed recording.

Before Selim stood stacks of incredibly valuable gold and silver coins, something she rarely got to touch during her life on the road. There was also a number of deeds blotted with moist black ink that stood out starkly.

“Fifty-three silver suns and fifteen silver *ranburke* from Mr. Hugo...”

The names Lawrence was rattling off belonged to different bathhouse owners in Nyohhira, and the coins were the amount they were asking Lawrence to exchange while on his journey. Gold and high-quality silver currencies were much too valuable to use for regular shopping. This inconvenience naturally made their owners want to trade them for coppers and other coins of smaller denominations.

The reason this task had fallen to Lawrence was because a worldwide boom in trade was apparently taking place, which in turn meant there was a systemic shortage in smaller coinage for making change and everyday shopping that affected every place of commerce, not just Nyohhira. The villagers wanted Lawrence to visit a money changer in the wider world if he was going to embark on a trip anyway.

And so, due to Lawrence’s popularity, bags stuffed with money filled the bathhouse’s large accounting table.

“...How much do we have now?”

Lawrence examined the bond—an official record of all the coins given to him so there would be no arguing as to who gave how much—and pinched the bridge of his nose. They had spent the whole day in front of the scales, weighing the coins to see if there were any notable imperfections or forgeries.

“Um...We have four hundred and twenty-two silver suns, forty-one gold *lumione*, twenty-two silver *ryut*, thirty-seven silver *ranburke*, twenty-two silvers of prince-bishop Tideryne...”

Running along the page Selim held was an unending parade of silver coins

that Selim had never seen or heard of before in her life. Not only that, but they had been given an odd number of these coins. At the very bottom of the page, there were even some silvers they had only one or two pieces of.

Surely Lawrence hadn't closed his eyes because they were tired.

"...Everyone sure has some nerve to hoist the stuff they don't want to deal with onto me..."

I knew it, Selim silently thought to herself.

Anyone who travels knows that the variety of coins they encounter far exceeds the number of towns they visit. Especially when traveling to another region, the same silver coin could end up buying much more or much less. There were even times when a currency wasn't accepted at all, which made things complicated.

In Nyohhira, where many patrons hailed from faraway lands, it was common for businesses to accumulate coins that were not in local circulation and were difficult to use in the region.

"Well, I don't really mind the coins...It's not like I'll be carrying them all with me."

Lawrence was a former traveling merchant, so he could draw upon plenty of mercantile magic.

Selim had initially assumed that he was going to set off with a heavy bag of coins, but it turned out that Lawrence was simply going to write the value down on a paper called a "money order" and take only that with him. The money order apparently served as a guarantee that any company would accept the note and exchange it for the written value in cash. If he could skillfully use it in a situation where it was treated as a company's bond when he was on his way to town, then it had the same effect as physically carrying a whole mass of coins.

For someone who had spent such a long time traveling and had never been trusted by anyone she came across, the relationship of faith among merchants seemed like nothing less than magic.

"The real problem is that thing over there..."

Lawrence was looking at the horses and deer busily working beneath the eaves of the bathhouse, visible through the front door that had been left ajar. They were opening cloth bags of various shapes and sizes that had piled up outside, sniffing the insides, mixing the contents around, checking the weights, and jotting things down on the wax boards they held.

“Are you going to be selling all of it?” Selim asked cautiously, and Lawrence turned to her with the face of a dog that had been tricked while he kept poking at the scales in front of him.

“If I can’t sell all of it...I’ll still have to do something about it.”

Lawrence was sighing about bags stuffed to the brim with sulfur powder.

More precisely, it was not sulfur itself but a substance harvested from the waters of Nyohhira. It was a standard Nyohhira souvenir, since it gave people a chance to enjoy the feeling of the famous hot springs anywhere and anytime by simply adding it to their bathwater.

As popular as it was, the substance literally bubbled up alongside the spring water, so the villagers could harvest as much as they wanted.

The bathhouse masters, after getting word that Lawrence would be traveling, seized the opportunity to push onto Lawrence all the things that had piled up in their storehouses. They were hoping he would sell it off wherever he ended up going.

There was no questioning that Lawrence was a good-natured man, but since he was the newest bathhouse owner to arrive in Nyohhira, he did not have the option of turning down the requests of his predecessors.

Given her past life as a wanderer, Selim was keenly aware of how hard but also how important it was for a newcomer to adapt to a new place.

The inquisitive gazes she was always subject to in front of the bread oven could easily, and at any time, transform into hostile glares.

“Apparently, I can keep a portion of what I sell to cover my labor, which makes this a testimony to the other bathhouses’ trust in me. I’ll have to do my best to sell what I can,” the always-positive Lawrence said, a smile immediately crossing his face, before returning to his duty of weighing the coins.

As Selim watched her boss busy himself with work, there was nothing she could say. Even she sometimes found herself growing restless around this painfully honest and reliable man. She wanted to be of help to her kindhearted boss, but it was upsetting that she could not come up with any specific thing that she could do.

At the same time, she grew nervous again thinking about how easily she could ruin the trust that Lawrence had worked so hard to accrue in this village. If any problems cropped up while she was caring for the bathhouse, then Selim would have to deal with them as Lawrence's representative when she was called for a meeting in town.

Furthermore, Selim had slowly gotten a grasp on the state of affairs in the village. It seemed like one of the reasons that Lawrence of Spice and Wolf couldn't shake the newcomer treatment no matter how much time passed was due to the exceptional success of his bathhouse, which surpassed over half the other bathhouses in the village despite its relatively recent establishment. There were many who were not comfortable with being confronted by the success of a new face.

When Selim thought about how they shouldn't give others a chance to take advantage of them in the first place, instead of holding it against the masters of the other bathhouses, she actually turned a slightly reproachful gaze toward her kind and wise boss.

Don't give me this kind of responsibility.

In addition, now that Lawrence had been saddled with the sulfur powder and the duty of exchanging the large-denomination coins, it was clear that he had to take care of most, if not all, of his obligations before he could return to the village. That would essentially delay their return.

Even though she fully understood the situation, Selim wanted him and Holo to come back as soon as possible. She didn't want to have to sit at this desk alone. While she wanted to live up to their expectations, that was exactly why she feared the vastness of the problem she had to face.

If she failed in any way, it would immediately hurt the boss she so adored, and since she was not that confident to begin with, the very idea made her

want to cry.

As she thought about this and that, she heard familiar footsteps.

When she looked up, she saw Holo coming down the stairs.

“Well, that all seems rather important.”

That was the first thing she said after seeing the state of the desk.

Holo was in a slightly different state than usual—her wolf ears and tail were not hidden. She usually had a kerchief wrapped tightly around her head and kept her tail underneath her skirt.

“The most important thing is over there.”

Lawrence pointed outside. Holo sniffed and shrugged.

“I have been watching from the second floor. I feel as though my sense of smell will be thrown off by the incessant odor of sulfur.”

The baths were located in the back. Curiously, when no one was in the water, the strong scent of sulfur would waft into the rest of the building.

“Honestly, you must learn to keep your generosity within bounds. Do you not know how to refuse others?”

With less sulfur to sell and fewer coins to exchange, they would have been able to come back quicker. Selim mentally gave Holo’s words her full support.

“This is evidence of responsibility and trust. This means I’ve somewhat made a place for myself here in the village.”

Even though Lawrence was usually sharp, for some reason, he always seemed like an idiot in front of Holo.

“You fool. ’Tis their nice way of making you an errand boy.”

Holo struck down Lawrence’s claim, then came around the desk. When Selim tried to stand to give up her chair, Holo stopped her with a hand.

“Your work will still take some time, no?” Holo asked as she gazed at the mountain of coins and the scales resting on the desk.

“Things would go faster if you helped instead of pushing all your work onto

Miss Selim.”

Selim was startled to hear her name, and her eyes met Holo’s.

Holo looked at her with gentle, smiling eyes before regarding Lawrence with a cool gaze.

“Fool. You are stingy and want to avoid doing any shopping in town, so I have a mountain of mending to do for the winter clothes we will wear on the road. Or perhaps you do not mind if I pilfer some of that gold there?”

Her true form aside, Holo’s human body was that of a slender girl who appeared younger than Selim. Her fingers were so slim that her thimble for mending almost seemed like an unwieldy gauntlet.

The height of autumn was fast approaching, and once winter finally arrived, warm clothes would be incredibly precious.

“I don’t mind, but whatever you take will be coming out of our food and drink budget while we’re on the road.”

Lawrence certainly wasn’t one to go down without a fight.

Holo pursed her lips.

Selim loved watching the two interact; she never tired of it. It gave her something akin to hope, seeing people who could be this happy in this world.

“So? What do you want? Did you just come to poke your nose in our business?”

“I was merely thinking about taking your measurements for furs. I hear the fur tailor came into town this morning. Every bathhouse has orders for winter, no? We need to put ours in quickly lest we are left with the scraps as requests pile up.”

“Yeah, that’s true...,” Lawrence said, and his gaze briefly flitted to Selim. It was an apologetic gaze characteristic of a kind person who was always considerate of those around him.

“I will take care of the rest,” Selim said.

“...I’m sorry. Thank you.”

When Selim smiled, Lawrence returned the look with relief before turning to Holo.

“Make it quick, please.”

“‘Twould not be so much of a hassle if you had only maintained your old physique.”

“Urgh...”

Whenever Lawrence lost his composure—he had started to worry about his waistline lately—Holo smiled mischievously.

Then Holo the Wisewolf, who had lived for centuries and once reigned over a vast forest, stuck fast to Lawrence like the young girl she appeared to be as they climbed up the stairs together.

As Selim saw them off, a slight feeling of exasperation came over her, but it also brought relief to her tense face.

One of the reasons she hadn’t been crushed by the weight of the great responsibility she had been given was because no matter what, she wanted to avoid putting a damper on the intimate relationship between the two.

She could not bring herself to do anything that might harm their happiness.

Selim quietly repeated that to herself and began her work again.

Now that there were eight more of them, dinnertime became quite lively. As the master of the house, Lawrence occasionally ate at the same table as his guests, but Holo rarely did so because she had to hide her animal ears and tail. Her demeanor also made her seem aloof, but Selim had recently realized that Holo might be even shier than she was.

However, when their guests were other nonhumans, there were no such constraints. Holo boasted as she drank that no matter how drunk she got, no one would question her ears and tail, which earned her a disapproving look from Lawrence.

That being said, Selim could not exactly say that Holo was truly relaxed and enjoying her meal. While she seemed easygoing at a glance, she was actually being more attentive than anyone.

After dinner, Holo called Selim over. Once Selim finished clearing the dinner table and wrapping up all the preparations for the coming day that needed to be done before heading off to bed, she went outside and found Holo in a nearby cluster of trees. Surprisingly, she was on her own; Lawrence was probably having a pleasant chat with the others.

And when Selim saw her, she confirmed once again that Holo really did have a delicate personality.

That was because the mistress of the bathhouse had some jerky in her mouth, something Selim had not seen at dinner.

"I hardly have any appetite for a stew without meat," Holo announced grumpily, perhaps noticing Selim's gaze. Her behavior suggested that she did not know how to deal with her pent-up frustration, but the very reason their meals scarcely contained meat ever since the other nonhumans had started staying with them was very likely because Holo had specifically put in a request with Hanna. Her seemingly grumpy attitude was just a way to hide her embarrassment over being so thoughtful.

"In that case, we should have my brother treat us to some meat stew at his inn."

When Holo called Selim outside, it was typically to accompany her to Selim's older brother's inn, which was across two mountains to the west. Selim had made her proposal thinking that it would be the same today.

"You fool. That is not why we are going today," Holo said to her, and Selim cocked her head in confusion. "There is simply something I would like to ask him and the others regarding the upcoming trip. Well, we shall talk more soon... Let us be off. If we tarry and waste our time, it will bleed into tomorrow."

"Y-yes."

It was almost impossible for humans to cross the mountains at night on foot, so they would go in their original wolf forms. Just as they started hurriedly removing their clothes, Holo suddenly spoke.

"It would not cause any trouble for them should we request meat stew, would it?"

Pausing just as she was about to remove her waist wrap, Selim stared blankly at Holo.

Holo wore a shy smile.

If anyone asked, Selim would confidently say this was what she liked best about Holo.

“I’m sure my brother would be delighted. I heard he and the others hunted a rather large deer recently, and I think this is right about when they would be planning to eat it. The flavor becomes stronger after being dried out for a little while.”

“Oh-ho. I can hardly wait.”

Holo undressed in a flash and transformed into a wolf first. The lay of her fur was magnificent and her form was as majestic as always.

“What shall I do about your clothes? If we’re having a little stew, then perhaps I should bring them along with us.”

Holo typically either left her clothes with Lawrence or placed them in a hollow in one of the surrounding trees.

“Indeed. Fasten them to my tail.”

Selim nodded and used Holo’s waist binding to do so.

“And attach yours as well.”

As Selim stood there blinking, Holo’s mouth widened into a fang-filled smile.

“You would have me try to do the same with my claws?”

Selim smiled. *That’s a fair point*, she thought, so she added her own clothes, reverted to her wolf form, and then they both dashed into the nighttime mountains.

As Selim and Holo sped through the dark mountains, their destination soon came into view. It was originally a monastery, and it now provided lodging for pilgrims who had traveled from all over to visit the saint who was said to be sleeping in a building on the grounds.

When Selim thought about how she was the source of inspiration for the

saint, she could feel her tail grow slightly itchy.

As they stood some distance away from the inn, Selim's older brother came out to greet them in human form, having sniffed out their presence. Selim always found it funny how well the long-sleeve, clergy-style robes looked on her brother, who had once been in the mercenary business.

"Apologies for the sudden intrusion."

"It's all right. What can I help you with today? Do you require more meat?"

In order to cut down on their overhead, Spice and Wolf often had Selim's older brother share some of the game he caught instead of buying meat in town.

In exchange, Lawrence purchased all the daily necessities Selim's brother needed so that he did not have to go into town for every little thing.

"In truth, there is something I wish to ask you."

"Oh..."

Her brother seemed slightly perplexed and looked to Selim for information. When their eyes met, she lowered her head slightly and looked up to him with rounded eyes, signaling that she did not know the reason, either.

"Were you busy?"

"Oh, no. We just have two curious guests staying with us now; we're taking it easy."

"Then, apologies, but I shall borrow some of your time."

Holo returned to her human form after speaking. Even though she was just as unclothed when she was in her wolf form, Selim's brother, Aram, still faithfully averted his eyes. Though it seemed a little strange, she understood why.

Selim followed suit, returning to her human form and putting on her clothes.

After righting the lay of the fur on her animal ears and tail, which had gotten mussed while she had been getting dressed, Holo spoke.

"Actually, what I would like to ask is about our kin."

"Our kin...You mean, our fellow wolves?"

“We shall be journeying for a short while. And I thought I might use this occasion to see more of the world.”

Holo spoke casually, but Selim could tell she was slightly on edge. Aram seemed to detect it as well, and he looked to Selim again uneasily.

He had angered Holo before the very first time they met. It was possible that was the source of his current anxiety.

Selim spoke up instead.

“Lady Holo, that’s...”

With that, it seemed to dawn on Holo that the poor siblings were having difficulty following her train of thought. She flashed a troubled smile.

“Ahhh, my apologies. I have been thinking about investigating an old friend.”

Holo once lived in a land called Yoitsu. She left her home on a journey, eventually settling down in a faraway land. However, after spending ages away from her homeland, Holo had lost track of her friend. The closest she got to a reunion after centuries of being apart was finding a piece of her friend’s claw.

Holo’s daughter now carried her friend’s name, but at the end of the day, she still had no clue where her friend might be.

“I know not when my next opportunity to travel might be, and most of us are hidden among human society, no? I thought you might have some information, after traveling for so long from the far-flung south.”

“Um...In that case, I will do what I can to help.”

When Aram responded, Holo smiled to show her thanks.

“Ah, one more thing.”

Aram immediately straightened his posture. Angering Holo that one time really left a lasting impression on him.

“I am a bit peckish. I wouldn’t mind some meat stew, if you have any...”

Holo’s bashful way of speaking was incredibly charming. That playfulness was just right for Selim’s older brother, who was often rough and awkward.

After staring at her blankly for a moment, Aram made a face akin to that of a

puppy being told to fetch.

“Leave it to us. We have some venison that has mellowed to perfection.”

“Oh-ho.”

It was only times like these when Holo licked her lips not for show.

“Would you like to take your meal in the monastery?”

“’Tis more relaxing out here. If we build a fire, it will keep us warm.”

“Very well.”

Selim’s brother gave her a glance, and she understood.

With a simple “Excuse me,” he headed back to the monastery.

On the way, Selim had been thinking about how unexpected Holo’s reasons were for wanting to come here.

Selim could tell just from living beside them that Holo and Lawrence were doing their best to spend their time together while quietly sweeping the differences in their life spans and species under the rug.

That was why she had figured that if Holo ever embarked on a journey to find her old friend, it would be after parting with Lawrence. To begin with, six months was not nearly enough time to conduct a thorough search, even if Holo was to spend that whole time running with the quick, strong legs of her wolf form.

There were more than a hundred countries in the world, and there were massive cities scattered about in places. The number of relatively large towns was ten-or even twenty-fold that of cities, and there were untold thousands of villages. Many of the ancient beasts now lived alongside humans, hiding in plain sight. Finding one of them at a time and following up on any leads they could offer was a backbreaking prospect. It would be much like how Selim and her companions had spent their time traveling, doing their best to confirm any rumors about their kin that they heard on their long journey.

Selim recalled that when Holo said Selim would be left in charge of the bathhouse, the plan was to be back around the following spring or summer. If Holo’s words were to be believed, then they would be gone for about six

months.

But now, as Selim was readying the stew with her brother and the others, she realized something.

What if Holo had no intention of returning after only six months?

Selim had no way of knowing if that had been her original plan or if she had perhaps changed her mind after seeing how much work the other villagers had pushed onto Lawrence. Either way, Selim considered it a distinct possibility.

Almost every day, Holo wandered around the bathhouse with pen and paper in hand, hoping something interesting would happen. Selim had seen her ask countless times about the cuisine of the faraway countries that some of their patrons hailed from, then ask Hanna to recreate it or ask Lawrence to buy any ingredients they lacked.

Selim was also well aware that with money and connections, traveling could be excellent entertainment. That was because even on her own travels, where she spent most of the time on the edge of starvation, she remembered almost crying at chancing upon strikingly beautiful scenery or being overwhelmed by the mere sight of solemn, dignified structures. It was impossible to forget such stirring moments. Since Lawrence had once been a capable merchant, he and Holo could fully enjoy the charm of traveling without much of the hardship that normally accompanied it. With the addition of a compelling reason to go on an extended trip, Selim got the feeling that Holo and Lawrence had no reason to stay away for only a short time.

But there was no chance that Selim would ask about it. She couldn't even bring herself to say something as pitiful as *please come back soon*.

Selim watched as Holo cut their share of meat, pulled apart some mushrooms, and happily volunteered to help with the stew itself. She even noticed Holo secretly adding more salt than necessary for basic seasoning.

While watching her easygoing attitude, Selim naturally became restless.

How could she...Without realizing how I feel...?

After the stew came to a boil, Holo leaned forward in the same mood as before, happily portioning out the meat and mushrooms. She piled meat into

her bowl, her tail waving about as she bit into her food.

She was so happy-go-lucky, like an innocent little girl who never minded the small things.

But Holo did not seem to be the kind of person who would break her promises, so Selim found herself feeling unnecessarily possessive and a tiny bit resentful.

Besides, if Holo truly wasn't planning on coming back for a long time, then she should have said that in the first place. Selim could not help but picture herself persevering through the busy season of winter and waiting eagerly for spring to come, wondering if her favorite couple would be back tomorrow or if it would be the day after.

She could see herself wearing thinner and thinner with each passing day. She got the sense that it would be bearable only because she would have faith that Holo and Lawrence would return the following day and always take over her work with a smile.

What would happen if spring came and went, and they did not return? Selim knew that she would break. Even the eight horse and deer guests staying with them would not stick around forever. Instead of imagining a tomorrow that would be fine no matter what happened, it was far easier for Selim to see a future where everything inevitably went wrong someday.

She could only stand such a thought precisely because she believed that they would come back one day.

But what if they don't...? Selim gazed at the bowl in her hand as she thought, and someone stuck a ladle into her field of vision.

"To make such a face before a delicious stew is blasphemous to the meat."

When she lifted her head, Holo was smiling mischievously, her bowl overflowing with meat and mushrooms and everything else.

"You should eat a little anyway. Meat will bring some of your color back, give your body energy, and dispel that gloom of yours." Holo spoke as she adjusted her seating. "If only we had some stiff drinks, 'twould be perfect." She cackled.

“Um...”

Selim was well aware that she did not have a very bright personality, but she couldn't help but think, *Actually, one of the two reasons I feel so gloomy right now is sitting directly across from me.* While she griped internally at Holo and cast a spiteful look in her direction, things took a sudden turn.

“After all, that fool of mine has a weakness for hapless girls. I will not be pleased if you get any strange ideas because of that.”

“What?!”

Ghrk. Selim heard someone make a strange noise, and when she looked up, she spotted Aram on the other side of the pot, choking.

“*Ahem...S-Selim, you—*”

“This is a misunderstanding!” Selim cried, and Holo laughed heartily.

“Heh-heh. Even if that fool of mine did fall for you, I would rip him to shreds first.”

How mischievous, Selim thought as she looked at Holo, whose amused reddish-amber eyes seemed impish and yet kind at the same time. Then the wisewolf flashed a fang in amusement.

“’Tis because I want you to stay in the bathhouse. Why not be more like Hanna so he doesn't become smitten with you?”

Hanna was stout; she wouldn't be out of place as a baker who followed the army to the front in times of war. There was no questioning that her stature was one of the bathhouse's best assets.

Moreover, Holo had been worried about Selim. She seemed ill-mannered on the surface but was more considerate of those around her than anyone else, which was probably why she noticed that Selim had been recently anxious about a great deal.

If Selim was going to ask if they were really coming back in the spring, now was the perfect time.

Just as she made up her mind and opened her mouth—

“Jokes aside, I am willing to take even the scantest of rumors about our kin. I would be happy if you noted it down on a map of sorts.”

—Holo leaped right to the next subject.

“Er...Right, of course.”

Aram’s response was faltering, as he was still busy inquisitively examining Selim. Between missing her chance and having to deal with her brother’s ridiculous assumptions, Selim naturally turned away in a huff.

Her brother, who could be oddly overprotective about certain things despite his intense belief that everyone should take care of themselves, finally seemed to understand.

“In that case, I’ll bring what you requested in the next few days. But some leads will be about those who don’t want to talk with outsiders or will be nothing more than rumors, though.”

“If ’tis not too much trouble, please include those explanations. ’Twas a human mercenary company that inherited and treasured my friend’s claw, after all. Who knows what other hiding places there could be.”

“I understand.”

“Thank you.”

Holo’s smile seemed rather strained, probably because of how stiff Aram was acting.

“Could I also ask for some jerky for our travels? That fool is a stingy one. Asking him to buy some in town would surely end with nothing but flavorless scraps that feel as hard as wooden boards.”

“We can take care of that, of course. The wind is strong at this time of year, so we can dry meat very well. With a little more time, we should be able to prepare some cured meat or sausages as well.”

“You fool. Your guests will suspect something if you run around preparing meat, staining your hands with scarlet blood.”

Aram stared back blankly before finally remembering the outfit he was wearing.

Embarrassed, he dropped his gaze and scratched his head.

“I appreciate the sentiment. Besides, enjoying local delicacies is part of the joy of travel,” Holo said, cackling.

Would Holo and Lawrence, both of Selim’s bosses, truly be returning in the spring?

Hanna had tried to calm Selim down, but watching the two of them only made her more nervous.

Selim bit into her venison.

A rich, hearty flavor immediately spread throughout her mouth.

The days continued to pass uneventfully, but the moment this everyday life would come to an end was creeping ever closer.

Lawrence had finished gathering the things the other bathhouse owners entrusted him with, and the notes Holo asked for regarding their fellow wolves were nearing completion. The eight new helpers were also just about to finish their training.

Selim was not sure if it was a miscalculation, but the new helpers were incredibly honest and hardworking. All Selim had to do now was maintain the bookkeeping and meet with visiting merchants to place orders. Aside from that, the bathhouse would essentially run on its own. Hanna and several others tried to reassure her, saying things like, “See, there was no reason to worry,” with a smile, but as per usual, Selim was uneasy.

She was still having nightmares. Recently, they had featured herself and her brother, along with the rest of their wolf companions; after discovering a shed in a cold village while searching on the road for a place to sleep, her brother and the others left, saying they would find some food, only to never return. Selim was annoyed with her easy-to-read neuroses, but those dreams were clearly reflecting her fears.

No matter how hardworking the horses and the deer were, they would not stay in the bathhouse forever.

Without some guarantee that Holo and Lawrence would come back in the

spring, Selim would surely end up breaking down, having nightmare after nightmare.

However, given that she was a mere helper, Selim was in no position to boldly ask her generous bosses to return quickly from a trip they were eagerly looking forward to right as they were making ready to leave.

That day, as Selim carried out lunch to the couple again while they prepared the wagon they would use for their journey, she hoped that the maintenance work would go on forever.

“Dear, can you not make the cart bed bigger?”

“What would we do with a wider cart? We’re not doing any business this time. You just want a wide cart to sleep in on the road anyway.”

“Fool. Remember exactly which one of us is a terrible sleeper!”

Before the quipping couple were several craftsmen, busying themselves with repairing the cart. Lawrence had apparently used it during his days as a traveling merchant, but more recently, the cart had mostly been for storage.

They had taken a rental on their trip to Svernel earlier in the spring, but at the end of the day, Lawrence preferred this one for a longer journey.

If she asked him why, the most likely answer would be that he simply preferred something he was used to, but to Selim, it seemed that this choice held some deeper meaning. Perhaps it was the best choice for the long, long journey they would soon embark on because it was also a return to their past travels together.

Selim placed the sandwiches of fried, cured meat and cheese along with some mead beside the clamoring couple, then quietly swallowed her sigh.

“Oh, food.”

Holo sniffed the air and turned around.

“That time already, huh? Please find a good stopping point when you all can.”

Though Holo immediately reached for the food, the first thing Lawrence did was invite the workers to take a break. This made Selim anxious—could she be as considerate as he was when she was in charge? The craftsmen responded

agreeably, then walked off toward the village center. There, they could easily find a cheap meal with generous helpings.

“And, dear, what shall we do about the horse?”

Perhaps because the craftsmen were now gone, Holo took the opportunity to remove the cloth wrapped around her head, raising her question as her ears flitted around, as though she was taking a deep breath with them.

“A horse, hmm...There is a horse in Svernel that’s descended from my horse from my old travels...but I don’t know if they’ll let me borrow it for six months.”

“Why not buy it?”

“You fool.”

Lawrence copied Holo’s manner of speech and donned a complicated expression. Horses were considered major assets, and Lawrence, occupied with calculating their future expenditures, was likely wondering how to approach the matter.

The brooding Selim almost had half a mind to offer to pull the cart herself.

Oxen pulled ploughs and dogs pulled sleds—there was surely no problem with letting a wolf pull a cart.

“I’ll find a reasonably priced horse. The wild, rowdy ones are usually cheap, but it’ll probably obediently do as you say regardless, right?”

“It might listen to me, but it may not listen to you.”

“That just means you should be sitting on the driver’s perch with me. Don’t just laze around in the back.”

Holo looked away in a huff and bit into her bread. According to Hanna, she had been much more laid-back before Selim came, often taking naps.

After Selim, a fellow wolf, showed up, Lawrence said that her presence was a big help in getting Holo to stop slacking so much.

On the other hand, perhaps that was one of the reasons why Holo did not want to return to the bathhouse.

“More importantly, do we have any ale? I have grown tired of talking and

wish to drink something cool and refreshing.”

“Oh, I’m sorry.”

Selim had chosen sweet mead because the couple usually enjoyed that when it was just the two of them, but that had been a mistake on her part. Just as Selim turned to rush to the kitchen, Lawrence stopped her.

“Miss Selim, it’s all right. Go on and get it yourself. How are you going to manage on the road with that attitude?”

“Urgh...”

Holo growled as she dragged her feet to the kitchen. Selim had been slightly surprised to find that Lawrence did not constantly give in to Holo’s whims, nor was she constantly hoping that he would spoil her.

“Sorry about that. Holo is always relying on you.”

“What?”

The comment was so sudden that Selim quickly became flustered.

“O-oh, no, I...”

She sounded forced in her speech, and Lawrence smiled weakly.

“She might act the way she does, but she tends to be afraid of strangers. That’s probably why the moment you let her in, she’ll stick right to you for support.”

While she thought that what Lawrence said was wholly accurate, Selim did not mind Holo asking her to do this and that at all.

“I—I, um...”

“No, it’s okay. I bet you were surprised when Holo brought up our request, weren’t you?”

“I...”

He was right. And her surprise had persisted, stubbornly clinging to Selim’s chest and shoulders, having transformed into a dull pain.

“Holo...Well, she suggested that we go traveling for my sake, but I really didn’t

think she would ask you and the others to look after things while we were gone.”

Of course he would be surprised. Selim was still just a young wolf pup, a babe who had fumbled her way through the human world and still only had roughly six months of experience since first coming to the bathhouse.

Selim knew this was her chance. She could say it now. She could tell him that leaving her in charge was as reckless as he thought and that he should reconsider.

However, Lawrence spoke first.

“But it’s a huge relief knowing you’ve taken on the job. Thank you so much.”

“...”

When he showed her his happy, unclouded smile, she could say nothing more.

“I know we don’t have to worry if we leave everything in your hands. We’ll certainly bump up your salary for all the extra work you’ll be doing.”

Lawrence’s tone implied it was already decided that Selim would be left in charge of the bathhouse, and it was an undeniable fact that he had long since introduced her as his substitute to the other bathhouse owners. Saying *Please don’t go on a trip or I’ll come along as well* after all that was far beyond her.

Then, at the very least..., Selim thought to herself.

She stared at Lawrence—who was examining the cart and the state of its repairs with a happy look, munching on his sandwich while perhaps contemplating his upcoming journey—then balled her hands into fists, trying her best to steady her nerves even as her heart beat so hard it felt like it would thump right out of her mouth, and finally spoke up.

“U-um.”

“Yes?”

Lawrence turned back to her, but Selim could not bring herself to look directly at him.

“U-um...I...”

“What is it?”

Selim grew more flustered—at this rate, he would only think something strange had happened.

Her gaze darted all over the place, and what she finally managed to say was this:

“Th-the sulfur and such...Are you going...to be carrying all that?”

The cart, after being used as a glorified shelf for all these years, was currently having its cracked boards replaced, its rusted metal bits polished, various parts reinstalled, and new wheels put in. It would soon be converted into a marvelous carriage that could carry a massive load and travel long distances.

For a moment, Lawrence responded to Selim’s question with a puzzled look but then smiled.

“Ha-ha-ha, thank you for your concern. But it’ll be fine. I’ll take it all with me out of consideration for everyone, but, well, I don’t think I can sell it all.”

“...What?”

“And...this is just between you and me, but...”

Lawrence glanced over toward the bathhouse. Holo must have been snacking in the kitchen; she still hadn’t come back yet.

After checking, he spoke with a crafty grin.

“There’s a reason why I accepted so much sulfur powder and so many coins that need to be exchanged.”

“...A reason?”

Was it not because he was thinking about his position in the village? That status was the exact reason she had been so nervous about potentially hurting the reputation Lawrence had worked so hard to build.

But Selim’s worries aside, Lawrence wore a rather calm smile on his face.

“Yes. You should already know what it is. Holo requested something peculiar from you and the others, didn’t she?”

For a moment, Selim wasn't sure what he was talking about, but she realized quickly that he meant the question about their kin.

"Aram came all the way here this morning to deliver it. Holo thought I'd get upset if I found out, so she had Hanna take it."

As she listened to him, Selim had no idea how that had anything to do with the sulfur and other luggage.

And not only that, but Holo had gone to talk with Aram long after Lawrence had accepted the sulfur.

As Selim waited for Lawrence to continue, Lawrence released a small sigh, still smiling.

"Holo rarely ever shows her true colors, but the truth is that she wants to search for her old friend."

"That..."

"Of course, she figured that if she said it out loud, it would be problematic for me, so it seems like she's been hiding it, but...that's why she's trying to kill two birds with one stone in her own way this time. Actually, according to our guests, she's also scheming to go around helping herself to delicious food, so I guess three birds."

Still staring at the cart, Lawrence bit into the rest of his sandwich, chewed, then swallowed.

"On top of that, she's more stubborn than a mule. Let's say that she finds the faintest hint of her friend somewhere during our travels. If it seems like it'll be a little far away, I'm sure she will simply decide not to go. She'll insist it's too much effort. Even though she's always badgering me to buy food, that'll be the only time she'll prioritize the budget I'm always worried about."

Selim could somehow imagine Holo acting exactly as described. Holo's personality was generally kind, and Selim thought that her naturally timid nature was a strength of hers.

But when she thought about how Holo bared it all to her beloved Lawrence, it gave Selim, who had yet to fall in love, a strange feeling—one of envy but also

sadness.

“That’s why I packed in so much sulfur. That’s why I called in the craftsmen to make this so sturdy.”

The conversation suddenly came full circle, and Selim felt like she had awoken from a dream.

“All so I can say, Look at all the sulfur we have left from the other bathhouses. We can’t go back until we sell it all.”

The heady realization hit her.

This cart was packed full of Lawrence’s feelings for Holo.

She thought it was a wonderful thing, but at the same time, Selim was at a loss for words.

As she listened to him speak, it seemed like their journey would continue forever.

She knew that Lawrence would travel to the ends of the earth with Holo if it was for her sake.

“Our return might be a little delayed because of that...so please forgive Holo’s selfishness for my sake.”

When Lawrence finally uttered those words, Selim smiled in defeat.

Afterward, Lawrence asked Selim to go fetch Holo, who still hadn’t come back yet, so she returned to the bathhouse. Her steps seemed endless because she had a bad feeling.

She could see herself sitting forlornly at the front desk, continuing to wait for them long past their original return date.

Selim stumbled through the hall, walked down the corridor, and entered the kitchen.

What caught her by surprise then was Holo, coat in hand, working diligently on something.

“Oh, ’tis you.”

Holo glanced at her, and then returned to her work. Selim had thought she

would be snacking, just as Lawrence said, but that did not seem to be the case.

Selim looked to Hanna, wondering what was going on, but Hanna just shrugged in vexation.

“Erm, Master Lawrence is calling for you...”

“Mm.”

Holo gave a short response, shook out the coat, and then placed it on the counter again.

She seemed to be sewing something into the inside of the coat.

“I shall be tidying up here in a brief moment, so please wait.”

There were also waist sashes and other articles of clothing on the shelf next to her. As Selim watched, wondering what she was doing, Holo sewed with a practiced hand on a piece of scrap fabric of the same color as the coat and then slowly stuffed a folded scrap of paper in between the gaps.

“Oh—”

When Selim unwittingly made a sound, Holo glanced up at her.

“Mm-hmm. ’Tis what your brother brought over.”

She appeared to be taking the notes of information about their kin that Selim’s brother provided and concealing them among her clothes.

“I forgot how reliable he is. Although I am happy that Hanna received it for me, things would only become more of a hassle should that fool of mine see this.”

“Huh?”

Selim recalled the conversation she just had with Lawrence and couldn’t help but raise her voice.

It appeared that Lawrence was fully committed to pretending to not know what Holo was up to. If that hadn’t been the case, he wouldn’t have deliberately let Hanna be the one to accept the notes from Aram.

Selim felt like she was going mad—could she keep up the facade?—but then Holo dropped her gaze to her hands and continued.

“It would only be trouble. That man is a true fool, you know.”

Holo evidently thought Selim was at a loss for words simply because she was surprised.

“That’s why I have to quickly sew them into my clothes to hide them before he finds out.”

There were not too many notes, and Holo was dexterous, so the job was completed rather quickly.

Yet, Selim still did not understand why Holo was doing this.

“B-but, Lady Holo.”

“Mm-hmm?”

Selim opened her mouth in spite of herself only to recoil under Holo’s gaze.

As she hesitated over whether she should say anything, she figured it would be stranger if she stayed quiet.

“Erm...I believe Master Lawrence would be more than happy to help you search for our kin...”

Even if she had not just discussed that very topic with him, she would have thought the same.

Holo stared at Selim in return, then suddenly raised an eyebrow and smiled darkly.

“Exactly. He would be so proactive about it; it would tire me terribly,” she said, sticking her tongue out as though she was going to belch. “After all this time has passed, I do not intend to obsess over things. All I would like is a slight hint. That is all.”

Selim was taken by surprise at her unexpected response, and Holo offered a troubled smile.

“You have been so considerate of me; your brother wrote down all sorts of things with such precision. But in reality, I have no intentions of an earnest search. Nothing will come of such a short jaunt anyway.”

Those were Selim’s exact apprehensions. Holo possessed such great intellect

that she had once been extolled as the wisewolf, and she had eyes sharp enough to see through anything. She was already well aware of how wide the world truly was.

“U-um...”

“And you wish to know why, no?”

Holo’s question beat her to it, and Selim nodded as she tensed her shoulders.

Holo continued to sew as she spoke with a carefree attitude.

“’Tis all for that fool, you see.”

She showed her fangs as though she was suppressing something, which was most likely her shy smile.

“We cannot return to the village until we conclude everyone’s business, no?”

Holo spoke carefully as she neatly sewed on another scrap of fabric, then squinted to make sure it did not stand out. It would likely not be noticed if she wore it normally.

“However, he treats the old promise he solemnly swore to me with such gravity. Well, back in those days, he was also a massive fool who wandered into danger while insisting he would turn a profit. At least he says that he will no longer do such a thing. But still.” Holo stood from her chair and reached up to the ceiling to stretch. Her ears and tail shivered. “I do not wish to become his baggage. And I cannot bear the thought of the villagers saying this and that to him if he insists one day that we return to the village out of concern for me. That is when these notes will come into play.”

“Oh...”

When Selim responded absently, Holo folded the coat and the sash and cradled them in her arms.

“Should I say that my friend could be just beyond this town, that fool would continue traveling, saying ’tis all for my sake.”

Selim stood slack-jawed—but not because of what Holo was talking about.

It was because she had just heard a very similar story.

“And so I believe our return may be a little delayed because of that...I hope you will forgive us. I promise to repay you, in the name of the wisewolf.”

They were exactly the same when it came to things like this; Selim felt like she was looking at an odd painting.

It was like a picture of a staircase that seemed to endlessly go up that traveling street performers would parade around on the corner while shouting, *The strange, the marvelous, the bizarre!*

Lawrence said he had decided to accept lots of requests from the villagers because Holo wanted to search for her old friend. On the other hand, Holo saw that Lawrence had taken on an enormous task from the villagers, and so she deliberately came up with a reason to continue their journey in order to ensure his work was properly completed.

And both of them apologized to Selim, explaining that they might return later than expected.

But both of them thought the real reason they would be late was because of the other, and they both believed they had to do these things out of concern for the other.

“Oh, here comes the fool now.”

Holo’s ears stood straight up as she shoved the coat and sash toward Selim.

“Hold these.”

“Oh, uh—”

The moment after she spoke, Holo stroked her own ears, shook out her tail, and ran her fingers through her fur, nodding with a satisfied hum as she left the kitchen.

“Oh, there you are. How long were you planning on snacking?”

“Fool. I was doing no such thing.”

“Oh? Then I’ll ask Miss Hanna.”

“I mind not, but be prepared for your assumptions to be wrong.”

Selim could hear the exchange from the other side of the wall.

As she held to her chest the clothes Holo handed her, she felt for some reason like she wanted to cry.

“Oh dear, a life on the road with this fool. I can hardly bear the thought.”

“I could say the exact same thing.”

They spoke spitefully to each other, yet they sounded like they were on the verge of bursting out into laughter.

The two lived within their own fairy tale.

Selim looked to Hanna, and when Hanna noticed Selim’s gaze, she turned up the corners of her mouth in a vague smile and gave an exaggerated shrug.

Selim almost wanted to laugh at herself for being so worried about keeping the bathhouse running to the point where it was giving her nightmares.

That was because—

“Um—”

Selim exited the kitchen, calling out to them, and the couple, walking side by side, turned toward her at the same time.

“Um...”

Selim swallowed and then spoke.

“Please return from your travels quickly.”

The words she was so convinced someone in her position could not possibly say came out with incredible ease.

And then, the moment Holo and Lawrence heard her, they immediately pointed to each other as though they had planned it.

““That depends on—””

They both spoke at the same time, and then they both regarded the other with a frown.

“Why are you pointing at me?”

“Yeah, exactly—I was about to ask you the same thing.”

The two lived within their own fairy tale.

It was then that Selim knew she could take care of the bathhouse while they were gone.

That was because she understood the secret behind why this bathhouse thrived the way it did.

“Heh-heh.”

Selim giggled, making Lawrence and Holo both stare at her blankly, and then they started blaming each other for being laughed at.



Selim laughed and laughed in a way she had forgotten to for years.

They would return, and everyone here in this bathhouse would be waiting for them.

This bathhouse had been created because the two were so happy, and people came here to watch them.

The Nyohhira bathhouse Spice and Wolf.

A renowned bathhouse said to be the spring of smiles and happiness.

THE AUTUMN-COLORED
SMILE AND **W**OLF



THE AUTUMN-COLORED SMILE AND WOLF

If someone wanted to hold a lively conversation with a traveler who happened to be nearby, there were routine topics that could always be discussed.

The state of safety in the area, the market price of various coins, which towns had the best food, and so on.

There was, however, one topic that those who spent any serious time on the road could always lose themselves in.

And that was the question of which season was ideal for travel.

“Oh, I hate the hot and the cold.”

“Then spring or autumn?”

“Spring is not bad, but I cannot stand being so dreadfully restless. The melting winter snows, after all, make it muddy as well.”

The one speaking, combing fur spread across her lap as she sat on the driver’s perch of a cart, was a young girl, a hood completely covering her head. Generally speaking, she appeared plain, given that the only ornamentation on her person was a pouch hanging around her neck, but on closer inspection, the hems on her sleeves and on her sash were perfectly intact.

The sight of a girl wearing plain yet well-made clothes combined with the long and beautiful flaxen-colored hair peeking out from under her hood pointed to the possibility that she was a traveling nun or perhaps a lady from a good house on her way to be courted at an arranged meeting in a faraway territory.

The truth was that this girl was neither a nun nor a noble—or even a human.

Her name was Holo. This was the avatar of a massive wolf who resided in wheat. She was once the ruler of a land called Yoitsu, and she had been worshipped as the god of the harvest in a land far to the south. The fur resting

in her lap was not simply an accessory to warm her legs but her own tail that sprouted from her rear.

“When we set out, it must be in autumn, like now. While the winds might be chilly, ’tis nice and warm when the sun peeks out, and I quite enjoy sipping on mulled spirits in the nighttime. And this calm, somewhat lonely air that carries us ever closer to winter. Does it not suit an intelligent wisewolf like me?”

Holo, brushing her tail on the driver’s perch, seemed to be in a good mood as she chatted. Perhaps that was why the coat of fur on her tail seemed fluffier than usual.

Sitting beside her was a former merchant, Lawrence. Over ten years ago, he had met Holo entirely by accident, and they ended up staying together after a considerable adventure. These days, they lived in the hot spring village of Nyohhira, and it would soon be a little over a decade since he first opened his bathhouse, Spice and Wolf.

“True, the color of your fur pairs nicely with the fall colors of the forest.”

Holo took great pride in her tail, and she was always genuinely happy whenever he complimented her wolf form’s fur.

“But the real reason you like fall is because the food is so good in this season, isn’t it?”

The reason Lawrence spoke with a wry smile was because Holo was stuffing her face at that very moment with roasted chestnuts even as she groomed herself.

“There is no greater happiness in this world than eating good food.”

His teasing did not discourage her; she devoured a roasted chestnut with a joyful smile and continued to care for her tail.

With a small, tired sigh, Lawrence tightened his grip on the reins of the cart.

“Well, it’s not like we’re on a penny-pinching journey to make a profit. We’ll enjoy ourselves and dine on anything good we find on the road.”

Holo turned toward Lawrence with wide, wolf pup–like eyes and beamed in delight.

Besides quick errands that briefly pulled them out of the village, it had been over ten years since Lawrence and Holo had last sat atop a rumbling cart together.

Before opening up shop in Nyohhira, Lawrence could hardly have imagined a lifestyle where he stayed and lived in only one village. It was a given for a traveling merchant to cross vast distances, and of course he would often be filled with anticipation about when he might be able to set off to his next destination.

But running a bathhouse was incredibly hectic, and more importantly, it was fun. Or perhaps it was more apt to say that after their daughter had been born, Lawrence had no time to pine for the road anymore. Ten years had passed by in a flash.

Consequently, it was not Lawrence but Holo who had brought up the idea of leaving Nyohhira to travel around for a while.

However, it went without saying that Holo was much more of a homebody. She was the type to be perfectly happy lazing around, drinking liquor in the baths all day, so of course she had her reasons for suggesting a trip.

“Well, then...First, we should decide where to go, but I wonder where those two are now...Their last letter came from a town in the south of the Winfiel Kingdom, didn't it?”

A letter sat on top of the map that was unfolded across Lawrence's lap. Two signatures adorned it—one belonged to Myuri, his and Holo's only daughter. She was now maybe twelve or thirteen, which was right around the age when society expected them to start talking about marriage.

The other signature belonged to Col, the young man who set off on a journey of his own in hopes of becoming a priest. His handwriting showed how earnest he was in pursuing his dream.

He was someone Lawrence and Holo had come to know during their peddling journey, and he had helped run the bathhouse starting the day they opened. It was also probably apt to say that he had been taking care of Myuri ever since she was born.

Back at home, Myuri obviously adored Col, calling him “Brother.”

While they were not related by blood, they had a loving brother-sister bond.

Lawrence had come to learn the previous winter that he was the only person watching over the pair who optimistically thought of their relationship that way. When Col had left the village to chase his dream of becoming a priest, Myuri also left to follow him.

It came entirely out of left field for Lawrence, but his wife and Myuri’s mother, Holo, knew everything.

Holo had let Myuri go, so there was nothing more Lawrence could do.

Furthermore, he knew that one day he would have to send off his daughter to be married.

And if the person she would marry was Col, then he had no complaints.

While Lawrence tried to convince himself of that, he still felt uneasy on the inside.

“They sent us a letter from waters much colder than Nyohhira at the beginning of spring.”

Whether or not Holo knew how Lawrence felt on the inside, she fervently twisted the ends of the fur on her tail as she spoke, as though suddenly remembering.

“Right. A region of islands up north that I’ve never been to. Afterward, they headed south to the Winfiel Kingdom, spent the spring there, let the summer pass, and now they’re somewhere in the southern part of the kingdom...There’s always so much time between their letters...I really think they must have had their struggles, even if they won’t write about them...”

Lawrence knew well the dangers and hardships of traveling. He could not say anything so carefree as *No news is good news*.

Bandits frequented roads, and there were plenty of crooks lurking within towns. Even barring those hazards, there was disease and injury to worry about. Anyone unlucky enough to be caught out in the rain or snow would quickly learn that it was entirely possible to die of the cold or starvation.

As a father, Lawrence felt his heart almost rip apart when he thought of his adorable only daughter, but Holo spoke with something near indifference.

“What are you saying? There must be more enjoyable things to do than penning letters to send us, no?”

Lawrence turned to Holo. She must have reached a stopping point in her grooming, since she was cracking open more chestnuts, stuffing their contents into her mouth.

“All the letters they send come bearing the scent of fun.”

“...Fun...I guess so. Traveling is fun. All the delicious food and beautiful scenery can just snatch away your heart.”

Lawrence was speaking more to himself than Holo, and Holo gave him a sidelong glance.

“If that is what you believe, then I shall not say anything.”

“...”

He looked at her with the eyes of a sad puppy that had been mistreated.

Holo didn't think she had done anything mean, and in fact seemed rather exasperated with Lawrence's inability to accept the inevitable.

Of course, Lawrence was quite aware of the reality of the situation.

He had steeled himself for it from the moment his daughter was born—she would certainly one day go to someone else.

“...As long as they're happy...Obviously, I'm fine with that...,” he said in a thin voice, and Holo chuckled before leaning against him.

“How it vexes me to see a fool be plagued by such foolish thoughts.”

Holo's vaunted tail rustled.

“I am the only one who will stay by your side always. No matter what happens.”

She offered him a kind smile and looked straight at him.

The Holo he usually saw would often ask for a morning drink before falling

back asleep, and it was a daily occurrence that she either refused to let go of the blankets or openly declared her desire to not work. There were even times when she would throw tantrums after hearing stories from their patrons about exotic delicacies of faraway lands because of how badly she wanted to eat them.

That was why he often forgot that Holo was a centuries-old wisewolf.

This trip was something she had suggested out of consideration for Lawrence.

Perhaps they could see Myuri and Col once, either to calm down Lawrence, who was beside himself with worry about his daughter, or to help him accept things as they were.

Lawrence was indescribably happy that Holo was showing him so much concern. He was honestly happier about that than being able to see Myuri.

He didn't need anything else as long as Holo was by his side.

It was because he believed that from the bottom of his heart ever since long ago that he had extended his hand to Holo, the wolf who looked like a human.

A smile broke out naturally on Lawrence's face when he took in Holo's sincere expression.

"Yeah, you're right. I have you."

When he said that, Holo grinned. It was the smile of a long-lived and kindhearted wisewolf.

Lawrence gently wrapped his arm around Holo's shoulder and pulled her closer. When he squeezed tighter, Holo's tail started happily bouncing back and forth.

Heading out on a journey like this was worthwhile even if only because it meant they would have more time alone together.

"Oh."

"Hmm?"

Holo stirred in Lawrence's arms, and she looked up at him.

"I believe we should head to Svernel first."

“Svernel?”

It was the biggest town located near Nyohhira.

“Mm. The sheep and pigs and chickens there must have gotten plump over the summer, no? And that fool Millike must be around as well. I like it because there are always sweets.”

Millike was another animal avatar who had a centuries-long life span like Holo. He was also a man of influence in Svernel.

While the two of them always looked like they did not get along, they were surprisingly good friends.

The last time Holo and Lawrence visited him, they were served sweets that were sugared purple flower petals.

“...We’d be farther from the sea if we went to Svernel,” Lawrence replied, his eyes dropping to the map, and he suddenly felt a gaze boring into his cheek.

“We are not in a hurry.”

“Well, yeah, that’s true...,” Lawrence said, looking at the cheerful Holo with a cool gaze. “Don’t tell me you acted so admirably just now all to convince me to take a detour to Svernel...”

“Wh—?”

Holo’s wolf ears stood up straight and she widened her eyes, at a loss for words.

“I...I was simply thinking of you...”

Her ears drooped, her shoulders sagged, and her tail slumped; her entire body seemed to deflate.

Her slender frame made things worse—she looked so pitiful, but it wasn’t as if Lawrence had lived with her for over a decade with nothing to show for it.

“Honeyed peaches.”

“...”

Holo’s wolf ears perked up even though she clearly didn’t intend for them to do so.

Lawrence regarded her with narrowed eyes, and she opened hers again to glare back.

“Is that all you think of me?!”

He would never doubt the depth of Holo’s concern for him, but ulterior motives were ulterior motives.

“We *just* started our trip. If we indulge in luxuries from the get-go, we won’t have any money left for the rest of it.”

“You fool! Are you not supposed to be selling the cargo behind us in the first place?! A town filled with lots of people will be a good opportunity for you!”

Holo was referring to the great number of sacks piled on the cart bed. Inside was sulfur powder, sourced from the Nyohhira hot springs, given to them by the other bathhouse owners when they found out the couple was going on a trip, so it could be sold along the way.

It had been over ten years since Lawrence first opened his bathhouse in the village, but since he was still considered the newcomer, he didn’t hold a very influential position. When his seniors asked him to do something, he couldn’t refuse.

Lawrence would have to sell all the cargo while he and Holo were on the road, but sheer quantity made that difficult.

“The Nyohhira bathhouses order everything from Svernel. The market there is fully stocked with the sulfur from the baths, so we won’t have much luck selling there.”

“Grrr...”

“Let’s head west and follow the river down to a port town called Atiph. The catches should’ve all been unloaded by this time of year, so the town should be overflowing with fish. They’re all fatty and really good.”

“Fish do not fill me up...Ooh...stuffed chicken...roasted pig...beef shoulder...”

Holo groaned in a faint voice like a maidservant who never received enough food.

Just a moment earlier, she had been stuffing her face full of roasted chestnuts

—Lawrence could feel only exasperation.

Well, perhaps she simply craved something savory after feasting on the sweet chestnuts.

“You say that, but I can easily see you asking for seconds of those fish dishes in Atiph.”

Deep in the mountains of Nyohhira, river fish aside, most of the fare that crossed their tables was cured. Most seafood consisted of herring, though cod and flounder sometimes made an appearance. It was typically not the kind of food most people wanted to eat every day.

But fresh fish that couldn't be had anywhere but seaside towns could be boiled or fried.

“And if the point is to find a place where we can trade, then you should know that Atiph probably has fresh wine.”

Holo's ears perked.

“They might have dried grapes or, if we're lucky, fresh ones.”

Grapes could be found only in places that were relatively warm, so it was normally uncommon to find them fresh in this region.

Holo turned away in a huff with no intention of listening to Lawrence, but she swallowed.

“Well?”

She stayed quiet.

There was only the *clip, clop* of the horse's hooves and the rattling of the cart.

Above them on the road that cut through the forest, several little birds flew by, singing.

When Lawrence peered up at the sky and squinted, appreciating the fine season, he felt a headbutt on his shoulder.

“...You fool,” a sulking Holo said curtly. She had apparently given up.

Seeing Holo acting so childishly, Lawrence found himself smiling wryly. But some of that sentiment was also directed toward himself.

He had fought his share of battles with Holo's appetite in the bathhouse, of course. However, that duty generally fell to their worker Hanna, who was in charge of the kitchen, so this was the first time in a while that Lawrence got to do this head-on; it not only brought back memories, but it was also rather fun.

They had always been like this when he was traveling as a merchant.

A smile broke out on his face because he so adored these conversations of theirs.

"It finally feels like we're on a journey."

His manner of speech sounded so different that Holo's ears *and* tail stood on end.

Not long after, Holo begrudgingly stared up at Lawrence.

"Then—"

"Well, making my heart flutter still won't loosen my purse strings."

When he said that, Holo responded with a dejected look.

"Hmph. 'Twould be much too pitiful to be swindled out of it all right from the start."

"You say that all the time."

"What does that mean?"

"What about it?"

As they talked, the cart rolled lazily down the road.

In the end, they both stared at each other and burst out laughing.

There was a river that flowed through the mountain hot spring village of Nyohhira, so visitors often came and went by boat when they were in a hurry or when the snowdrifts swelled.

But when it came to loading a horse and cart on board, it became necessary to rent a ship with enough space to accommodate them, and a single crewman wouldn't cut it.

After reviewing their budget and other considerations, Lawrence and Holo

had finally departed on their journey atop their cart, and even after the sky started to display the colors of evening, they were still on the road. They strung a tarp between two trees, and at the small firepit they had shaped with rows of stones, Holo sat hugging her knees, pouting.

“...Camping straightaway...”

They had thought it might be possible to reach an inn at the nearest checkpoint if they tried their best, but it had been so long since they last took a cart along a mountain road, and they went slower than they had hoped.

“A soft bed...a thick blanket...a warm bath...plenty of meat and wine...”

Holo murmured, as though believing that if she closed her eyes and prayed, what she wanted most would surely appear right before her, but Lawrence ignored her pleas and handed her a dark piece of bread that was half-wheat and half-rye.

“Come on—we got this bread baked for us. It has some rye mixed in. Doesn’t it remind you of the good old days?”

On their previous peddling journey, Holo and Lawrence had rarely ever gotten to eat white wheat bread. They often dejectedly dunked wood-hard black loaves of rye in ale to soften them as much as they could.

Holo, now entirely used to the idle life of their bathhouse, regarded Lawrence’s cheerfulness with absolute disbelief.

“Why not just have regular wheat bread...?”

“Pure wheat bread goes bad fast. It might be fine in the dead of winter, but some days are still warm this time of year, and that will be especially true once we get off the mountain.”

Lawrence placed a small iron pot onto the firepit as he spoke, cutting thin slices of cured meat and putting them in.

Holo finally sighed, giving in as she started munching on her bread now that she had confirmed the presence of meat.

“Cut thicker slices.”

“Frugality, frugality.”

Holo glared at Lawrence with teary eyes as he quickly put away the hunk of cured meat.

“If we have any spare change left over, we’ll treat ourselves on the way back.”

When he offered Holo his merchant’s smile, the centuries-old, self-proclaimed wisewolf pouted and frowned like a little girl.

“You fool...Come now—fry the meat. This dark bread is so bitter and sour, I cannot stand it without meat.”

“Yeah, just wait a second...Hoo, ho...Hmm?”

Lawrence was hunched over, striking the flint together, but the tinder of plant buds didn’t react at all.

“It is dry, right...? Here we go...”

He clacked the stones together again, but they weren’t making sparks very well. He never kindled the fires himself at the bathhouse, so he was entirely out of practice.

After a short struggle, Lawrence’s hands and hunched back started to ache, so he stretched out with a groan. That was when he noticed Holo’s cool stare.

“...Just...just a little more.”

“I hope so,” Holo said with a sigh, and Lawrence started striking the flint together again, refusing to give up.

He then heard three very deliberate-sounding yawns from Holo, but the fire still would not light.

“...I should’ve practiced before we left...”

“I worry for the future.”

He looked reproachfully at Holo as she muttered, but she turned away.

“Mrgh...”

As he stayed crouched, striking the flints together, all sorts of spots on his body began to hurt. His joints were clearly stiffer than they used to be.

He was amazed, finally understanding what it meant to get older, and came

back to his senses when Holo remarked, “Honestly,” with a sigh. “If anger could start fires, then all I would have to do is tease you.”

Holo obviously had no intentions of blaming him anymore, and her attitude invited Lawrence to give an indignant response.

“No, if that was the case, then things would be faster if I invited a passing shepherdess to eat with us.”

“Oh, and what does that mean?”

“The Great Wisewolf should know what that means right away.”

Lawrence and Holo glared at each other and then sighed at the same time.

“’Tis fine, since we are not in the cold of winter yet, but...hard, dark bread and raw cured meat horrify me. Shall I make a quick run back to the bathhouse to retrieve some live coals for today?”

Holo’s true form was a massive, towering wolf; it would be easy for her to cross three mountains in a single night.

“No...Let’s leave that as our last resort...I appreciate the offer, though.”

“Hmm? Very well, then. I know you have your pride as a boy.”

Holo teased him, but he no longer believed that he would be able to kindle a satisfying fire.

“Considering how this is going, I feel like Myuri would be able to thrive outside the village much better than we can...”

Lawrence was truly upset at how pitiful he felt, and Holo, who was fundamentally a kind person, offered a troubled smile.

“True. She manages to hunt in the mountains in her human form, after all. Even I cannot do such a thing.”

While she could display her power as a wolf in all sorts of important ways, Holo was generally the little girl she appeared to be when in her human form.

On the other hand, though Myuri had the same physique as Holo, she could nimbly run through the mountains like an animal even while in human form. And above all, the most surprising things were her technical ability and

intelligence. She could create traps to ensnare game, butcher her catch, tan the hide, dry the meat; then once she kindled a fire using her drilling technique, relying on her slender arms and untiring strength, she could string a bow with an animal's tendon as she waited for the meat to cook.

She could flourish on her own in the mountains if they sent her out there.

"Mm, indeed. That little fool did try it once before, no?"

"Hmm?"

Holo stood as though recalling something, leaving the canopy to approach the cart.

As Lawrence wondered what she was doing, she pulled out a bag from the luggage piled on the cart bed.

"See, she once heard that the yellow powder could be used as kindling and made such a commotion when she tried it in the hearth, remember?"

"Right."

Lawrence instantly remembered and smiled wryly.

When he recalled that moment, he could actually detect the bitter taste filling his mouth again.

"She learned that from Mr. Luward, didn't she? A way to start a fire quickly."

"Why not give it a go? I'm sure 'twould not be a problem if it smells foul... Well, I shall still separate myself," Holo said as she placed the bag before him. It was stuffed with the sulfur powder harvested from the baths.

"I've heard that a pure hunk of sulfur is better for kindling, but...Well, I'll give it a shot."

He suspected that his trouble was because of his failure to use the flint effectively in the first place, but Holo wasn't alone in rejecting the idea of camping outside without a fire. Lawrence decided to try everything he could, so he scattered the sulfur onto the tinder and even rubbed some on the dried grasses and twigs.

He then crouched down and struck the flint together...and a bright-red flame

suddenly burst from the cottony tinder.

“Ooh!”

Even though it wouldn't have been such an event way back when, Lawrence could not help voicing his delight. The sulfur probably had very little to do with it; he was sure he had recovered his strength after a bit of a rest.

Either way, he didn't plan on letting the embers go to waste, so he covered them with his hand, breathed on them, and once smoke started to rise, he transferred the flame to the dried grass. It grew larger in an instant.

Why, it's easy after all.

Lawrence got up with a radiant look, and just as he was about to say those exact words to Holo, he realized she was gone. He looked around the area and found her hiding behind a distant tree, only her face showing.

“You don't have to be so...”

It happened just as Lawrence started laughing.

He then heard a sputtering noise as though something was burning. He turned around and saw thick smoke rising from the fire.

Immediately afterward, he covered his face once he noticed the offensive stench.

It was metallic, like charred iron—the smell of sulfur. The discomfort didn't stop at his nose—it left a bitter taste in his mouth and brought tears to his eyes.

“...!”

The odor was repulsive enough in his memory, but facing it in reality proved it smelled much worse than he remembered.

When Myuri had thrown the powder into the hearth without thinking, Lawrence could detect the nasty tang throughout the house for nearly a week afterward, and Holo had been sniffing it for nearly a month.

Not even Lawrence could bear the smoke anymore, so he ran toward Holo.

“You fool! Don't come this way!”

Holo genuinely rejected him, as though the day they exchanged vows of love

to stay together until death had never happened. Though Lawrence was slightly hurt, he stopped in his tracks because he saw Holo was holding bread.

He did not want to eat his dinner by that hellish fire, either.

He held his breath and returned to the fire, collecting his bread and the small cask full of ale before rushing to Holo.

Holo seemed grumpy as her nose wrinkled at his approach, but when Lawrence handed her the cask of ale, she reluctantly allowed him to sit next to her.

But she still gave Lawrence a displeased sniff and scrunched up her face.

“You shall be sleeping on your own tonight.”

Lawrence glared at her—*Who was it again who suggested we use the powder?*—but Holo wrapped her arms around her prized tail as though protecting it. She probably could not stand the thought of her fluffy tail smelling bad, especially considering how she painstakingly took care of it with rose oil.

Though true winter was still a while away, the mountain nights were cold. Having Holo’s fluffy tail and her childlike high body temperature made a big difference.

But that said, if he forced her to sleep together, she might actually grow angry with him.

Lawrence sighed, stared at the smoke billowing from the fire, and then sighed again.

Seeing how the first day of their trip had turned out made him worry about what was to come.

The next morning, Lawrence awoke with a sneeze, only to find Holo already sitting on the driver’s perch.

She was concentrating on writing something, probably her diary; she had not been able to write the night before because she refused to get close to the fire.

It frightened him slightly to imagine what sort of curses and complaints she was writing about him.

Whether it was because the sulfur powder had completely burned away or because his nose simply got used to the smell, he had managed to fall asleep by the fire the night before when it stopped smelling too terrible. Now, in the white ashes, the charcoal was glowing red.

“Is the smell gone?”

When Lawrence asked, Holo gave a big sigh. It was not terribly cold, but the air was damp, so her white breath danced in the morning sun.

“Somehow. Honestly, ’twould be very effective if you sold that as wolf repellent.”

“...I’ll think about it.”

Holo had meant it as a joke, so she flinched in response to Lawrence’s sincere reply.

“I guess we’ll have breakfast for now...We couldn’t eat anything warm last night.”

“You ate the meat from the pot, no?”

Lawrence shrugged as he added more fuel to the ash.

“I told you that it didn’t smell as bad as I thought it would, but you didn’t believe me.”

Holo groaned and stepped down from the driver’s perch.

“The sulfur on the cart is not as terrible, but you must quickly do something about all this.”

Last night, she had slept in the gaps between the bags of sulfur on the cart.

“You always used to get mad when I put something on the cart on our old trip. Fish, metal, anything.”

Once the fire started growing, Lawrence set up the iron pot, filling it with the cured meat and some eggs they had brought from Nyohhira. As long as the shells didn’t break, eggs kept well and added variety to meals, which made them valuable. They were often buried inside things like flour when stored for travel. Of course, on this trip, they were being kept inside the sulfur powder. As

long as the eggs weren't left in the bags for too long, the contents shouldn't start tasting like the powder they were packed in.

"I would not be so angry if you brought along anything more delicious. Something like dried fruits or perhaps sugared ones."

Her tail wagged as she spoke in rapt attention.

"Fool. Sweets are expensive."

As Lawrence copied Holo's usual insult, he made a slice in some bread, scooped up a serving of fried egg and cured meat with a spatula just as it was done cooking, then stuffed it into the bread along with a topping of cheese.

"Here."

"Hmm."

Holo took the bread, and just as he thought she would bite right into it, she stared fixedly at it.

"What is it?"

"Hmm."

Holo stayed in place, her head hanging low from staring down at her food, only lifting her gaze to look at Lawrence.

"I did not eat any meat yesterday. I believe I should receive more now to make up for lost meat."

He was astonished by the extent of her gluttony first thing in the morning, but he collected himself—he should not give in to her cajoling.

"No. Trips have itineraries. You know from our previous peddling journey that not sticking to the plan will land us in trouble."

Holo always seemed like she wanted to do things her way, but she understood when pushing and prodding wouldn't get her anywhere and could pull back at those times. That was because she could see the difference from Lawrence's usual demeanor that often led to him spoiling her whenever she pressured him.

That was why when he spoke firmly for a change, Holo was evidently

dissatisfied, but she nodded reluctantly.

“You have always been blockheaded.”

“Call it being careful.”

Holo glanced at Lawrence and shrugged.

That was most likely a sign that she was surprised he had the nerve to call himself that when thinking back on their old travels together. On his journey with her, he often tried showing off in front of her, intentionally getting himself involved in risky business.

And more importantly, not even a full day had passed since the night they ran into trouble with just one campfire. Lawrence was not very convincing.

“...Yesterday was our first day on the road in a long time. Things will go smoother from now on.”

He could not help but say that, sounding as though he was making excuses.

Holo, her mouth firmly attached to a bite of egg yolk, flitted her ears about as though reluctantly believing him.

Afterward, they reached the checkpoint along the river. Of all the tolls on the waterway, this one was the first or second largest. It was rather lively, considering it was also treated as the ending point of the highway that stretched all the way from the southern reaches of the continent.

Grains, processed meat, and metalwork flowed here from the continent; furs and lumber came from upstream; the bounties of the ocean and imports from faraway countries came from down the river.

Holo and Lawrence considered staying the night at an inn beside the checkpoint, but they arrived just before noon, so they simply broke for a meal and departed after a short break.

While they were doing so, the innkeeper suggested that they use a boat after hearing they were traveling along the river to reach the sea.

He was rather enthusiastic, but inns standing along the river often jointly owned boats with boatmen who went up and down the waterway, so convincing a guest to book passage on their boats meant innkeepers could

make money from them twice over.

Monks not used to going abroad might readily take up the offer, but Lawrence was a former traveling merchant.

Holo hated camping outside and wanted to take the boat, but when Lawrence told her that the quality of food would go down accordingly after subtracting the price of the boat ride, she reluctantly accepted traveling across land.

Four days had gone by since they departed from Nyohhira.

“...So? What is it?”

Holo sat hunched over on the driver’s perch, resting her chin in her palm.

Lawrence, in contrast, held a map in one hand as he wandered in circles, puzzled.

“...I’m lost.”

Lawrence spoke in a frail voice, as though sentencing himself to death, fearfully looking up at Holo.

Holo did not smile at him kindly from her perch, but she was not angry, either.

“Hmm, I thought this might happen.”

“Maybe it really was out of kindness that you suggested taking a boat...”

He knew where it had all gone wrong.

He did not think there would be a problem, since the path that followed the river went all the way to the sea, but there had been a terrible landslide along the way, so the road depicted on the map had become blocked off.

And so they traveled along the new path that the locals had set out, but that one ended up crossing the roads that the hunters and woodcutters used, so Holo and Lawrence ended up becoming lost along the way there.

The road was smooth and wide enough for a cart to pass through, and there were charcoal huts dotting the trail, so he had assumed that it was a commercial road. By the time he had realized that there shouldn’t be any well-used charcoal huts on a new road, they had already cut across a bluff, passed over a ridge, and finally found themselves deep within woods that did not

appear on their map at all.

“This is no longer my territory. Luckily, it does not seem there are any nuisances nearby.”

Holo turned toward the sky and sniffed the air.

She might have been looking up, but the flora here was completely different from what populated Nyohhira, with incredibly tall and wide trees growing here and there that almost entirely blocked out the sky.

The light barely reached the ground, so there were very few shorter trees, which actually made it quite easy for the cart to travel along the road.

Though it was dense, they could see oddly deep into the forest; sometimes Lawrence sensed a strange gaze on him, which made him shiver.

Those glances mostly belonged to foxes and deer, so as long as he was with Holo, the king of kings of the forest, there was hardly anything he needed to fear.

But Lawrence was human. He felt an instinctual fear of the abyss of the woods.

“This seems to be a land humans rarely ever enter. The path, too, is less a road and more a nicely flattened channel made by the natural streams of water that appear during heavy rain. There are quite a number of fallen leaves, which make it hard to tell for certain.”

Indeed—places similar to this that were very much like traps for humans existed in the mountains.

Luckily, their cart was stuffed with bags of terrible-smelling sulfur, and Holo had the nose of a wolf.

If all they needed to do was turn back, then there would be no problem.

“...Let’s retrace our steps. We won’t be able to tell which way we’re going, since we can’t know the position of the sun in a forest as thick as this.”

Just as Lawrence got ready to bring the horse around, he realized something.

Holo had gone entirely expressionless.

Lawrence was ashamed of how much of an idiot he was and spoke.

“You can be mad at me.”

That would put him more at ease.

Holo stared at Lawrence blankly.

“Mm-hmm...Mad?”

Lawrence shrugged in resignation, and Holo glanced around the area before sniffing.

“’Tis a regular thing for you to boast about taking care of everything.”

There was no bite or malice in her words, but that just made them hurt even more. Worse, Lawrence had no room to make excuses, so he had no right to be cross with her.

“Besides, ’tis not terrible that we came here.”

“...?”

Holo’s voice was calm like the forest in the rain.

“’Tis a nice wood.”

Even though they ended up lost as a result of skimping on boat fees, Holo wore a faint smile.

This was much more unsettling than having her hurl abuse at him, but the reason Lawrence suddenly started panicking a little was because he got the sense that Holo might suddenly vanish among the trees.

He hurriedly shook his head and looked around him at the woods once more.

“Nice...? It looks like a normal forest to me...”

Rather, without many shorter trees and much underbrush, it seemed like a forest of little value to Lawrence. The wind did not find its way in easily, either, given how thick the canopy was, which meant that it would be hard to find mushrooms. If anyone started cutting down the massive trees, which represented the sole source of value in this forest, the whole area would soon be barren.

“It may seem that way to you, but...’tis the scent.”

Holo closed her eyes and inhaled deeply. Lawrence followed suit. He felt comforted by the smell of humus, but it was a common smell.

“Perhaps a human nose cannot tell. ’Tis the smell of syrup. The whole forest smells sweet. I think...these large trees are filled with syrup.”

“It doesn’t seem like there any are flowering, but...sap? If we can get some sap, we might be able to make a little side money.”

If they mixed some with glue, then they could use it to fill in gaps or to add flavor to distilled spirits.

However, Holo looked at him with a strained smile when he spoke like a merchant.

“That is what you always say.”

“It’s important. I have a big eater at home, you know.”

“And my *master* has no sense of direction.”

He could not argue with her in this situation.

Lawrence gave up on a counterattack and led the horse at a walk.

“You’ll have to tell me where to go. Or should we just press on and hope we come across a road that leads to the ocean?”

Holo seemed somewhat reluctant when she stared deep into the woods, eventually sighing lightly.

“Should I return to my wolf form, I will be able to sniff out the right direction straightaway. But even if I do, this cart cannot go straight through here. I believe it will be faster in the end if we return to a man-made road for now.”

A forest with cliffs was also bound to have marshes. Getting lost, even with Holo beside him, was because not all roads stayed straight. But just as Lawrence was about to apologize to Holo for his foolishness, something happened.

“Hmm?”

Holo sat up straight and stared into space.

“What is it?”

Holo’s ears twitched left and right. Her ears were good enough to hear a flea cough.

There was no doubt that she would hear it right away if anybody tried to sneak up on them.

“What’s wrong? Is it a bear or a stray? Or...bandits?”

Lawrence immediately leaped onto the driver’s perch and took the dagger out from under his seat.

It was impossible to avoid danger during travel.

Just as he readied himself for whatever might come at them, Holo spoke.

“’Tis a bee. Unusual for this season.”

“A bee?”

Before long, Lawrence could also hear the faint hum of wings.

But as he sat there, looking around trying to spot one, Holo suddenly grabbed his arm.

Her nails painfully dug into him.

“Wh-what?! Ouch, what’s—?”

Holo’s widening eyes cut Lawrence off, and the fur covering her ears and tail stood on end like a stiff brush.

“Oh, ah, ooh...”

Holo’s voice barely made any coherent sounds, rumbling in the depths of her throat. Lawrence thought at first that there might be a huge swarm of bees approaching, but what slipped out from behind one of the large trees was just a single, regular bee.

But the moment he thought something seemed a little off, Holo screamed.

“Ahhhhhhhhh!”

Lawrence did not even have the time to be shocked by the scream the likes of which he had never heard coming from her before. She rubbed her face against

his chest like a rabbit trying to crawl into its hole. Her ears lay flat on her head and her tail was puffed and swollen, like she was under a thundercloud.

He was puzzled, unsure of what was causing such alarm. Then he noticed the single bee lazily drawing closer.

It did not seem particularly angry. In fact, the bee seemed more confused as to why humans were there.

But as the buzzing grew louder, Holo started to tremble harder. It worried him—he had no idea she was so scared of bees. She loved honey and happily ate bee larvae fried in oil because it was hot and delicious like lily buds. Or perhaps it was because this was a special sort of bee? The bee was indeed a little odd. Its black-and-yellow-striped pattern seemed typical, but for some reason, a white string hung from its body.

Lawrence stared at the bee as it buzzed overhead.

Holo shivered in his arms like a squirrel afraid of a rampaging dragon.

As Lawrence watched the bee leisurely passing before them, he noticed something.

“Oh, it’s...”

He unconsciously reached out.

He caught it easily.

It being the string hanging from the bee.

Lawrence immediately undid the hand towel on his waist and suddenly wrapped it around the struggling bee.

While he listened to the angry buzzing, he realized that Holo was staring at him, all the color having drained from her face.

“Wh-what are you doing?”

Holo wouldn’t have made such a face even if he suddenly threw everything in his wallet onto the street. She gave a sidelong glance at the bundle of cloth like it was an atrocious thing and then immediately hid her face again.

“Throw it away, quickly!”

Lawrence shrugged and said, “What’s the matter? It’s just a bee.”

Holo immediately tensed.

She had many traits that were maiden-like, but he felt like being afraid of bees was not one of them.

“Don’t tell me this is a bee that’s like one of you?”

—A creature that lived for centuries, that understood the human language, like a spirit of the forest.

If that was true, then he thought this was very rude of her, but Holo buried herself deeper into his chest and shook her head. Her tail was still quivering.

It was then that Lawrence, with a questioning look, peered at the bee angrily buzzing its wings inside the cloth.

“I—I...I cannot...”

“Hmm?”

“I cannot...bear it...”

Holo spoke weakly, her voice shaky due to her tears.

“That insect is being eaten by another insect...is it not? It sickens me to think of it...”

“Oh...Ohhh.”

When she said that, it finally clicked.

People had their strengths and their weaknesses. Even the most stalwart of soldiers could find themselves frozen in a high place, and the most devout of monks who loved all of creation could still lose themselves when faced with a spider.

He had never heard of Holo being unable to handle bees and other bugs. But there were some things she simply could not deal with on an instinctual level. That turned out to be insects afflicted by parasites. Anyone who traveled through mountains and forests would sometimes come across unsettling sights that could be thought of only as the darker parts of the world.

“Hmm...But...”

When Lawrence brought the cloth closer to Holo, she shrank back, almost rolling off the driver's perch.

"Eek!"

"H-hey, come on—that's dangerous."

"N-no! No!"

While he thought about how cute she was when she was this desperate, Lawrence spoke.

"The thing hanging from the bee isn't a parasite. It's just a string."

Holo shook her head, as though declaring that she wouldn't be fooled by his lies.

But when Lawrence sighed with a troubled smile, Holo finally lifted her head slightly.

"R-really...?"

As Holo's childlike attitude stirred something in his heart he had never felt before, Lawrence responded.

"Yeah. I'm sure."

Holo must have been able to hear that he was not lying, but he also understood why she still doubted him nonetheless.

"Th-then...why is it...here...?"

"You're asking why there's a bee with a string around it, right? A bear can't use a spool, after all."

But Lawrence had an idea.

"You said not many people enter this forest, right?"

"...? Y-yes."

Holo raised her head and responded, but when the bee in the cloth buzzed, she tensed up again.

"I think someone might be poaching the bees."

"..."

Holo stared at Lawrence with widened eyes and then looked to the cloth.

“...Do you mean to say 'tis a marker?”

Of course the wisewolf would sniff that out.

“But I have never seen such a thing in Nyohhira...”

“It’s because the mountains are treacherous out there. You wouldn’t be able to follow a bee in those parts. But this forest has great sight lines, so you can tie a string around a bee as a flag and follow it back to its hive. But...if they’re doing this here, then it’s a poacher who doesn’t want anyone else to see them. Nobles and people like that normally own forests, so beehive hunting costs money.”

“Mm...So that means...” Holo peered up at Lawrence. “There...is a hive nearby...?”

“I don’t know if it would be full of honey at this time of year, though.”

The harvest time for beehives was between spring and early summer.

But hives filled to the brim with honey could be worth harvesting even in the dead of winter.

Holo rubbed her watering eyes and sniffed.

“A beehive...”

“That sure cheered you up.”

Holo pouted and glared at him when he teased her.

“Should we follow it?”

Holo had large, triangular animal ears and a fluffy tail. She seemed like the type who would run at full speed after a leather ball stuffed with sheep’s wool.

She would rage at being treated like a dog, but her tail was already restlessly whipping back and forth.

“But a bee’s territory can be large. Do we...have time?”

On the surface, Holo always seemed to want things to go her way, but this was her true nature. Whenever something she truly wanted appeared before

her, she hesitated. She had been the same way with Lawrence. It had been Holo who once upon a time wanted to end their journey together before she fell even more in love with him.

On the other hand, Lawrence was a merchant. He greedily reached out to anything he realized he wanted.

And Holo's smile sat at the very top of it all.

"I guess we're not enjoying the true pleasures of travel as planned, are we?" He then added, "We had a rough time starting a fire, and now we've veered way off track."

Holo raised her shoulders and giggled.

Lawrence acted clownishly as he rubbed Holo's cheek with the back of his finger.

"Plus, I got to see a side of my traveling partner I had no idea existed."

Even though he knew Holo down to the direction of the swirl of hair at the base of her tail, he never thought she would hate the sight of one bug being consumed by another so much that it would make her cry.

Realizing that one of her weaknesses had been discovered, Holo stared up at Lawrence with a frown.

"...Fool."

Lawrence was confident that he could easily love her for another hundred years.

"Then I guess we'll go chase the bee. We'll be fine leaving the cart here, right?"

"This is not a place for humans to enter. There are likely no thieves around. As for our surroundings...I believe this spot should be fine because of the smell."

"Right, the sulfur. Should we take a bag and scatter the powder on the path?"

"Hmm. Let me think...Ah, I see. Heh-heh."

Lawrence looked to her, and she was delightfully giggling.

"'Twas part of a fairy tale, no? Children lost in the woods, leaving a trail of

bread crumbs to find their way home...”

“Yeah, there is a story like that, but you look like you came straight from a fairy tale yourself.”

Holo blinked and then smiled.

Lawrence handed the bundle of cloth to Holo and then immediately started collecting tools that would come in handy for quickly harvesting a beehive. He retrieved an empty linen bag; a pole usually used for propping up a tent corner, measuring the depth of mud, or chasing away stray dogs; some firewood; and a set of flint. Then he gathered all the spare cloth he could find to cover his face and body.

And lastly, sulfur powder to mark their path.

“All right, now we can go.”

Holo nodded firmly and unfurled the bundled cloth.

They thought the furious bee might sting them at first, but after buzzing in circles out of evident confusion, it flew off, heading deeper into the woods.

Holo and Lawrence weren’t following very fast, but since they were walking with their eyes on the string, Lawrence tripped and almost fell more than once.

Holo’s physical strength matched that of the young girl she appeared to be, but her wolflike qualities were obvious, given the way she skillfully threaded through the mountainous terrain. She turned around to watch Lawrence stumble along, then immediately walked backward nonchalantly toward him, grinning all the while.

“Come now—you must give it your all to keep up.”

She whirled around and leaped off.

Her fluffy tail bounced about before him, and Lawrence found himself relying on her tail’s guidance to stay on course.

He frantically followed after her as she walked lightly, crunching the leaves beneath her steps and bounding over massive tree roots.

She occasionally looked back, a happy, joyful, and teasing smile playing across

her face.

Even back at the bathhouse, Holo often teased him about failing to stay in shape, so he defiantly managed to at least keep his footing. However, she seemed to enjoy watching him do that as well.

After the distance between them grew to a certain point, Holo stopped, perhaps because the bee had also stopped somewhere, allowing Lawrence to finally catch up to her.

“Phew, hah...I’m not really sure if I’m following the bee or you anymore.”

He breathed hard and aired out his clothes. The air was mostly still in this forest, so it felt dreadfully humid when they moved about.

“Is it because you are always so enraptured by my tail? Are you having a good time?”

Holo showed not a hint of appreciation for his hard work, but Lawrence found himself following that mischievous smile of hers.

“Oh yes, this is just the best,” he responded with displeasure, and Holo chuckled, then looked up with a hum.

“We begin anew.”

“Okay, okay.”

The bee flew from the tree, staggering through the air. Lawrence occasionally dropped some sulfur so they would not forget the way back to the cart.

At this point, for all intents and purposes, Lawrence had no idea where the cart might be. They were so far from any sort of civilization that if Holo abandoned him, then he surely would wind up dead in a ditch somewhere. But when that crossed his mind, he doubted that he would be able to live at all if she did such a thing, the thought of which brought a wry smile to his face.

“Listen.”

Holo abruptly stopped and called out to him, bringing him to a sudden halt.

“Hmm? Whatever is the matter?”

She peered at him questioningly, but he brushed it off, pretending he had

sweat in his eye.

“No, what’s up with you?”

“Mm-hmm. The hive is near. The buzz is loud. ’Tis quite large.”

Her bright, fang-baring grin was so charming, it was almost unbelievable that she had been shaking in his arms just minutes before.

Their peaceful, repetitive life in the bathhouse was also undeniably wonderful.

But traveling together was just one surprise after another. It was a chance to discover the unexpected side of people.

And it was all the more fun with a partner as emotive as Holo.

“What shall we do next?”

With her varied expressions, she quickly put on a more serious one as she spoke.

And he could tell that she was not as serious as she seemed.

“What do you mean? The best thing would be to have you go take the hive in your wolf form. You have thick fur. You probably won’t get stung too much.”

After turning to him with a reproachful look, her intentions to do no such thing clear, she offered him a flirting smile, typical of a girl who knew how cute she was.

“Are you not averse to relying on my wolf powers?”

“...”

That was true, but that issue had more to do with his pride, so it was not a problem when it came to harvesting beehives in the forest...is what he wanted to tell her, but arguing with her would just be a waste of breath.

Not only had they gotten a late start and ended up having to sleep roughly on the very first day, he had been unable to light a fire, and after everything else, he had gotten them lost.

If he could not manage to recover here, then he had no idea what Holo might coax out of him in the future.

“I guess it’s a knight’s job to walk into the jaws of death for his princess.”

Lawrence lowered the load from his shoulders, crouched down, and started getting ready. Holo cackled and remarked, “What an unreliable knight you are,” as she hung over Lawrence’s back and wrapped her arms around him.

He was glad she was in a good mood.

Lawrence wrapped cloth over his face, neck, wrists, and ankles, leaving only his eyes exposed before starting the fire.

It lit immediately.

“We chase the bees away with smoke, yes?” Holo confirmed with him.

Lawrence attached the twigs to the end of the pole in the shape of a bird’s nest, drove the butt into the ground at his feet, and placed the slightly damp leaves on top with the embers.

White smoke soon began billowing upward.

“This little smoke is mostly just for peace of mind.”

“Is that so?”

“If we burned so much that we found it hard to breathe, then it would definitely be effective, but...Well, there’s so much foliage underneath the hive that I’m sure the fire would spread...What is it?”

Holo was staring off into space in response to Lawrence’s explanation. For a moment, he entertained the idea that perhaps she pitied how her husband would be stung all over, but instead, she pointed.

“Why not use that?”

“What?”

She was suggesting that they use the devil’s powder that summoned hell itself when a single pinch of the substance was added to a fire.

“Well, that’s...”

Lawrence faltered but then decided it was worth it.

“We’ll give it a try. Now that you mention it, we don’t usually see any bugs in

Nyohhira.”

The smell of sulfur permeated the village they called home. Plenty of withered trees could be found throughout the area around Nyohhira as well, so it was understandable that many depictions of hell were described with the odor of burning sulfur.



“Also.”

“Mm?”

Holo stared blankly, and Lawrence proudly spoke.

“If this goes well, we can tap into a whole new market for all that powder.”

Holo, who had said herself that it would be effective as wolf repellent, shot him a grim smile.

“You would make money even if you slipped down into that hell the Church speaks of so often.”

How lucky Lawrence was as a merchant to hear such a compliment.

In the end, they managed to collect the hive. It was on the larger side, so they could expect to harvest quite a lot of honey from it.

The price he paid for it was a bitterness he felt deep in his lungs whenever he coughed, plus three stings on his face, two on his neck, and five apiece on his hands and legs, plus the burning stench of sulfur that came off him in waves, so potent that even he could smell it.

But his prize?

A smile from Holo so great that it made her eyes literally sparkle.

“Mmmmmm! So sweet!”

The hive was so grand that simply smoking it had not been enough to kill the bees inside. They would have to keep it in a sack and process it later, but before they put it away, Holo had broken off a piece of the hive, saying it was for “taste testing,” and stuck her spoon into it.

Honey immediately trickled out and clung viscously to her spoon. It had a deeper color than the honey Lawrence usually saw and practically resembled hard candy.

Ultimately, the honey was so good that Holo’s tail waved energetically even as she brought the spoon to her mouth and caused her to raise her voice in a cry of delight right after.

“Let me have a lick,” Lawrence requested, and Holo, sitting on the driver’s

perch, looked at him like he was a dreaded debt collector.

After grudgingly shutting her eyes, as though to say she knew that the one who had bravely volunteered himself to obtain this honey for her was none other than Lawrence, Holo extended her spoon toward him.

With a tired smile, Lawrence scooped a bit onto his pinkie and had a taste. He was struck by a heady sweetness that did not belie the honey's impressive appearance.

And not only was it sweet, but there was also a peculiar scent about it, as though the honey carried the faint fragrance reminiscent of a decomposing tree, imparting a sense of what it smelled like deep inside a forest. Naturally, it had an excellent effect on the taste, giving its flavor more depth.

"This is incredible. What kind of syrup is it?"

"You can taste it as well, no?" Holo said, savoring the honey as she licked the spoon. "'Tis born of the large trees in this forest. Syrup of the trees."

"Tree syrup...Sap, huh? Interesting."

Now that he thought back on it, the bee had stopped at a tree on the way back to the hive.

Lawrence learned that day that bees did not collect nectar only from flowers.

"I wonder if the poacher knew the secret of the nectar here."

Someone else had wrapped a string around the bee before they arrived.

"I wonder as well. Bees always cross unbelievable distances. Perhaps it got collared when it became lost on a faraway mountain."

Whoever attached the string to their guide had not found the beehive, so what Holo said was entirely possible.

"But boy, we sure picked up a big one."

Lawrence had finished putting away the tools he had used to secure the hive and was reexamining the large sack sitting on the cart bed.

"I wasn't sure what was going to happen for a second there."

This deed of his should have been enough to clear his name of the trip's

earlier blunders, and he wouldn't be surprised to have a little left over after the exchange.

Holo, still greedily licking her wooden spoon, noticed Lawrence's gaze on her and huffed.

"Were you planning to curry my favor with sweets?"

Her reddish-amber eyes stared straight at him, but Lawrence paid them no mind as he climbed up onto the driver's perch and sat next to her. She deliberately pinched her nose and scooted away from him.

"Of course I am. If we take that into the next town, we could get enough honey to fill an entire hand bucket."

"Ooooooh."

Seeing how Holo's eyes glittered in expectation, Lawrence didn't even bother with a wry smile.

He flicked the reins, and the horse moved forward.

"Sheesh, good and back luck really are two sides of the same coin, aren't they?"

A great man once said that good fortune and ill fortune were interwoven, like a rope. Lawrence was certain those wise words were perfectly accurate.

"I would prefer it if you could find a coin with good luck on both sides, though."

When Holo spoke spitefully, Lawrence had a response ready.

"Don't you always crave something salty right after eating sweets? It's the same thing."

"Perhaps you are right."

Holo then placed her hand on Lawrence's, which gripped the reins, and snuggled up to him.

"We got lost because a salty someone skimped on a boat. I sure hope that I am treated veeery well in the next town."

"Huh? Wait, that was—"

“That was’ what exactly, hmm?”

Lawrence was at a loss for words in the face of Holo’s bright smile.

When she cocked her head slightly, he finally released the breath he had been holding.

“The price we get for the honey. That’s your limit.”

Lawrence glanced over to Holo, and she beamed, pleased.

“Ha-ha. What a fun trip, no?”

She squeezed her arms around him tighter, clinging to him.

Maybe he should point out that she never complained about him being smelly at times like this.

But even if Holo was behaving rather deliberately, that didn’t necessarily mean she was acting that way only for show.

Lawrence could see the difference between his beloved wife’s real and fake smiles.

“Yeah, it’s fun. So, so fun,” Lawrence said. “I’m here with you, after all. Of course it’s going to be fun.”

Holo’s eyes widened, and her ears and tail began to twitch.

They were deep in the woods, far from any human settlement.

Making the excuse to no one in particular, Lawrence wanted people to know that if anyone could smell something particularly sweet nearby, it had to be the beehive in the back and nothing else.

THE COLORS OF
THE **F**OREST AND
WOLF



THE COLORS OF THE FOREST AND WOLF

The cart made its way leisurely down the riverside road.

The forest thinned and the path started to even out. A few days after leaving the hot spring village of Nyohhira, said to be at the edge of the world, it finally felt like Holo and Lawrence were starting to catch glimpses of the mortal world. And yet, they still sometimes found themselves swallowed up by the mountains that reached the very edge of the river, and sometimes their path forced them to venture deep into the forest.

It was autumn, and they were wading through a sea of fallen leaves that came up to their ankles. The crunch of leaves underfoot was satisfying, and the smell of humus was invigorating. The only problem was that the fallen leaves often concealed the correct path, occasionally creating the illusion of a path that could not exist.

The couple almost found themselves lost on these fake roads many times, discounting the woods that they were familiar with. They did actually become lost once, making their way deep into a wood. By the time they realized their error, they were in a place not marked on the map, a scary situation that gave them chills when thinking back on it.

Lawrence, gripping the reins from atop the driver's perch, might have been a former merchant, but he was no woodcutter who wandered the forests freely.

He would soon fall dead if he got lost on his own and would either wind up as feed for the denizens of the forest or otherwise a nursery bed for mushrooms.

"You fool, that is not the right way."

Luckily, he had a reassuring partner sitting next to him who sometimes told him which way to turn.

It was a girl with flaxen hair, a color that the autumnal forest suited well. She was combing a pelt of the same color on her lap, but she was not the girl she

appeared to be. Wolf ears topped her head and the pelt in her hands was in fact her very own tail.

Sitting beside Lawrence was Holo, the avatar of a wolf who resided in wheat, a being who had lived for hundreds of years and was Lawrence's dear companion for life.

"I get chills thinking about how I used to travel alone," Lawrence said as he pulled the reins to turn the horse around and put them back on the correct path. Holo emitted an annoyed sigh.

"That is because the only asset you have to your name is your good fortune."

The outline of Holo's fluffy and carefully groomed tail shimmered gold in the autumn sun. And since she always used rose oil to polish the fur, it was as beautiful as anything that could decorate a nobleman's villa.

"That's very true. I mean, I met you along the way, didn't I?"

Lawrence took her by surprise, saying those words in such a casual way. Holo's eyes immediately shot open before she went back to grooming her tail with a chuckle, but the way her ears flitted about showed that she was not as detached as she would have him believe.

She was crafty, kept plenty of things to herself, and often demonstrated her deep store of wisdom and knowledge of the world—but she also found joy in things as obvious as this.

Lawrence thought about how he could always stay by her side and never grow tired of her company because of things like this.

"We really should've taken a boat down."

They could occasionally see the river from the twisting and turning path. It led all the way up to the hot spring village of Nyohhira, so there was quite a lot of boat traffic on the river. If they were willing to splurge, they could load their cart onto a ship and reach the sea in merely two days while they quietly gazed up at the sky and dozed off.

The reason they did not was simply for frugality's sake.

And the other reason was because Lawrence felt it would be a waste if they

went so quickly.

This was a journey alone with Holo for the first time in years, and he wanted to take his time and enjoy it.

“But man...my back aches...”

Lawrence stood on the spot, still holding the reins, and stretched his back.

While it may be in part because he had not ridden on a cart for a long time, one of the reasons was his age.

“You exert the horse too much. Trust in it more,” Holo scolded him as he stretched, cracked his neck, and sat back down on the driver’s perch.

“Am I really using that much force on it?”

“Aye. ’Tis almost like when I first sat beside you.”

Holo cast him a sidelong glance with an impish smile on her face.

Ten or so years ago, before he traveled with Holo, Lawrence was not used to being around women, so he used to constantly become flustered whenever she teased him.

“But I guess that hasn’t changed much now, either. I’m holding the strings to my coin purse shut as tightly as I can so that none of the coins inside get wasted.”

When he chased his response with a smile, Holo stomped on his foot.

“You fool.”

Holo butted him on the shoulder with her head, and that only made him smile even more.

“Honestly, what am I to do with you...?”

As Holo was about to return to minding her tail as she muttered, her ears suddenly perked up.

“What is it?”

Just as Lawrence was about to turn to her, Holo lightly leaped from the driver’s perch.

His eyes followed her as she walked along the crunching fallen leaves, but then she vanished behind a giant root that reared up from the ground. The moment he thought that his beloved maiden had run off to pick some flowers, she returned.

Her arms were full of large mushrooms that resembled opened umbrellas, and they practically hid her face.

“This forest is open and breezy. Mushrooms are easy pickings here.”

She had been like this for the entire trip, and the cart bed was overflowing with foodstuffs. Lawrence could not help but smile as she leaned over the cart bed to file the mushrooms away into their respective sacks, her tail wagging all the while.

The sky was clear, and the weather was comfortable.

He sincerely thought that the only people who were enjoying such a lovely journey had to be them.

“This is fun.”

The words slipped from his mouth before he could catch them.

Once Holo finished squirreling away the food, her ears and tail stood up straight in a reproving manner. The moment she turned around, though, the tension vanished, leaving her fur soft and relaxed again.

“Mm-hmm.”

Holo took her place on the driver’s perch again and smiled with delight.

When they first left Nyohhira, he had found it difficult to light a simple fire, and later got them lost, which made both of them doubtful about how the rest of their journey would turn out, but it seemed like they could continue to have an enjoyable trip.

As Lawrence took a deep breath, savoring the serene moment, Holo’s tail nestled closer to join him under the blanket covering his lap. There was nothing warmer than carefully tended fur.

Befitting a merchant, Lawrence made the inexpensive wish that this time would last forever. Perhaps that was to blame for what happened next.

Holo spoke slowly.

“Listen, dear.”

“Hmm?”

“I would like to write my memories down so that I will never forget how enjoyable this time is.”

With a smile, Holo snuggled up to Lawrence’s shoulder.

“I have used up all my ink...When might I expect to receive a new batch?”

Whenever she smiled innocently, that usually meant she had ulterior motives.

Holo had been sweetening him up only so she could try to get something from him.

Just like how there was no such thing as a journey that consisted of only good times, there was no journey without its expenses.

Holo was trying to win over Lawrence to buy her more stationery supplies because ever since they embarked on their trip, she had gotten carried away by her good mood and taken advantage of all the free time she had on her hands by writing and then writing some more.

Holo might live for hundreds of years yet, but Lawrence would not. He had suggested for her sake and because of their differing life spans that she should write down what happened every day. That way, she could forever enjoy these blissful days, as long as she wrote so much that she would forget what she wrote at the beginning by the time she reached the end.

Lawrence was not entirely sure if that would truly be a good thing, but Holo, at the very least, had been delighted by the idea. It was even fair to say that she had become obsessed. Ultimately, he was happy to spend money on her paper, pens, and precious ink—which did not come cheap. It wasn’t like he could bring coins with him to the afterlife.

He was satisfied with that line of thought, but at the end of the day, Lawrence was a merchant at heart.

He could not help but recoil at how she had used up all her writing supplies jotting down whatever she pleased in the few, scant days since their journey

began.

“Why don’t you peel a bit of bark off a tree and write on that with a nail?”

Holo’s true form was a massive wolf, so she could acquire as much bark as she wanted with a single swipe of her claw.

“You fool, tree bark does not last long.”

“Well...I don’t think we’re going to get any writing material unless we make it out to sea and go all the way up the coast to the port town of Atiph.”

“Do they not have sheep and cows wandering about up there?”

It sounded like she was planning on butchering them with her massive claws, skinning their remains, and fashioning parchment from their hides.

“And we would secure some meat from them as well, so two birds with one stone. No ink, but...Oh well, ’tis the same either way.”

“I’ll tell you up front that I don’t know how to make parchment.”

“How useless.”

Lawrence came incredibly close to saying, *Who’s the one who wasted it all?* before he swallowed those words. Holo had written a tremendous amount while her tail floated about only because so many fun things had happened.

They had several large hemp sacks full of cargo lying in the cart bed. Alongside the bounty of the autumn woods that Holo had been constantly harvesting on the road, there was one bundle that made a buzzing sound that anyone listening carefully could hear. There had actually been an incident earlier involving some of this bag’s occupants suddenly escaping through gaps in the lining before whizzing around Holo and Lawrence.

In that bag was a massive beehive, one Lawrence had obtained only after enduring several stings to various places on his body.

“Good grief...Well, it’ll take us a little out of the way, but we can make a detour.”

“Oh?”

Lawrence offered a suggestion as he unfolded the map, and Holo’s interest

was piqued.

“There’s a branch in the road right here. I think there should be an inn nearby...Yep, there it is. People on their way to Nyohhira stop by there, so I think they might have a store of some paper and ink.”

The guests of honor who patronized the hot spring village of Nyohhira included nobles and royalty, as well as archbishops from cathedrals, abbots from great monasteries that owned massive swathes of land, and more of the same. For this class of people, their job was to write, so it would not be surprising if the inn had all the tools they needed to do so.

“Then, we shall head that way. And what praises they shall receive if they offer hot stew as well.”

Lawrence had thought that Holo had been collecting food on the road because it was her way of showing consideration after using up all her paper and ink, but when he saw her licking her lips over what might be in the stew, it became clear that she was just amusing her appetite.

Either way, as long as she was having fun, then that was enough.

“All right, let’s check it out.”

“Indeed.”

Lawrence watched Holo from the corner of his eye as she agreed with a satisfied nod. He let out a resigned sigh, then diverted the horse from their original westward course to head north.

The inn was not very far away.

It appeared to have once been a gathering place for woodcutters, so as a holdover from that, there was a pile of several logs nearby, left to the moss and rot. The inn’s sign, which resembled an ax, sat above it.

The inn itself was covered in more ivy and moss than the logs were.

“Mm. This is a good inn,” Holo said, sniffing. Since the inn was located deep in the woods and the building itself seemed very old, their first impression was that it was like they had stumbled upon a dwelling for forest spirits.

However, the beams and pillars supporting the eaves were made from lumber

that looked freshly cut, the fenced garden had vegetables growing in it, and there were goats and pigs lazily munching on sunny patches of grass.

It was readily apparent that the place was well maintained.

That said, Holo was admiring something else entirely—the scent of bread that wafted from the inn’s chimney.

“Shall we be staying here tonight?”

“If they have any beds open.”

The reason Lawrence gave such a tentative response was not because he was hoping to save on lodging by sleeping in a shed.

He had noticed three magnificent-looking horses tethered to stalls in the stables, as well as several people who were already enjoying some drinks who were most likely the horse guards.

There was a good chance people of considerable status were rooming here.

“Well, I’ll at least ask if we can sleep someplace with a roof.”

“Shall I pretend to be ill?”

“They might let you sit in front of the fire, but I don’t know if you can expect meat and drink like that.”

“Ooooh.”

Lawrence smiled wryly as Holo sincerely fretted over the possibility of no meat or alcohol with an earnest expression. After he found a spot to park the cart, he decided to first open the door to the inn.

“Excuse me, coming in.”

The staff must have been in the middle of preparing dinner because he was immediately greeted by the sweet fragrance of bread. The unmistakable smell of garlic and fat tickled his appetite.

Holo followed in after him, her stomach grumbling loudly.

“Well now, we don’t often see people like you around here. A traveling merchant, is it?”

Someone who appeared to be the innkeeper stood from a table where he had been in the middle of a lively conversation. There were white streaks in his beard, and he looked exactly like the kind of person who would live in the forest.

“No, I—”

Just as Lawrence was about to introduce himself, someone who had been sitting at the same table as the innkeeper spoke up.

“Well, if it isn’t Sir Lawrence!”

Lawrence looked and saw a monastery abbot who had come to stay as a guest at his bathhouse several times.

“What a pleasant surprise, Father Abbot. This must be God’s guidance.”

“What a coincidence. Oh, and your wife.”

When the abbot greeted Holo after noticing her presence, she gracefully nodded—she was always a skilled actor at times like this.

“Sir, this is the owner of Spice and Wolf in Nyohhira.”

“Well, well. Don’t tell me you have plans to open a bathhouse in this area, do you?”

Everyone laughed at the innkeeper’s joke, and after shaking hands with Lawrence, he offered them a seat.

There was a person of rather high standing there who had stayed seated.

“Ah, Sir Lawrence, this is Lord Beavery, ruler of the neighboring land. Lord Beavery, this is Sir Lawrence, owner of a prominent bathhouse in Nyohhira.”

“Ah, a bathhouse. I’ve heard of it. A bathhouse of endless smiles, is it?”

Though he was apparently a neighboring lord, he had no attendants with him, and he readily offered a hand to Lawrence. Lawrence introduced himself, exchanged a handshake, and, after introducing Holo, took the seats they were offered. This Beavery did not seem to be the sort to say too much about his position.

“But, Sir Lawrence, shouldn’t you be busy working to prepare for the winter

right about now? Or perhaps you are on your way to pick up an order?"

The question was out of the blue, but there was nothing in particular he needed to hide about Col and Myuri. So as Lawrence relaxed, he announced that they were on their way to see the two, and the abbot gave a deep nod.

"I see. My word, we've been hearing about Sir Col's activities. It feels like hearing about a war hero to us, but I'm sure you must be worried."

Col had struck out from Nyohhira, saying that he would give his all to reform the Church that had become so deeply corrupted. Their only daughter, Myuri, had gone after him, and by all accounts, the two of them were accomplishing great things.

"Father Abbot, are you on your way to Nyohhira now?"

"Yes. It is because of Sir Col's influence that things were so dizzying this spring and summer. Things have finally calmed down some, so I decided that I should take a break as soon as the chance presented itself."

Right now, the owners of churches and monasteries were being forced to reevaluate their assets because of Col's and Myuri's influence. They were busy getting piles of permits and property in order to avoid being turned into scapegoats.

"Gosh...I'm sorry Col has been causing you so much trouble."

"Oh, no, he's not any trouble at all. This is a fantastic opportunity. It's hard to get started on a thorough cleaning without some sort of catalyst."

And as someone who was being asked to help with that cleaning by the clergy who patronized the bathhouse, Lawrence found his cordial smile drawn taut.

As they chatted about this and that, Holo suddenly lightly tugged on his sleeve.

She was asking if they could cut to the chase and request what they had originally come for.

"Oh, that's right, if I may inquire about something," Lawrence began. "Would you happen to have any spare writing implements?"

It was not just the abbot but also the innkeeper, who had brought him his

drink, who stared at Lawrence blankly.

“Writing implements?”

“We are writing down what we see along the road in order to add to our stock of knowledge, but we have run out of paper and ink. We were hoping that we might borrow some, if you had any left over.”

When Lawrence spoke, the abbot and the innkeeper exchanged glances, then both looked at him in tandem with troubled smiles.

“Well, we were just talking about this very thing.”

“Sorry?”

The abbot cleared his throat.

“Thanks to everything Sir Col has done, all the vaults of the world are in the middle of literally turning themselves inside out right at this moment. And Sir Col is also working on a common-language translation of the scripture so that anyone may read it, yes? That has quite the impact—quills, ink, and everything else fly off the shelves as soon as they arrive.”

There were not many people who could read and write, so there were typically only a limited number of people who needed pens and ink.

“I have also asked around in the towns I’ve stopped in and they’ve been hard to find, leaving any leftover stock at a terribly high price. Lord Beavery here”—the abbot gestured to the lord—“he bought and stockpiled quite a bit last year, so we were just discussing how much he might share with me.”

The word *lord* evoked an image of someone with a dignified beard and features, but while Beavery did have a magnificent beard, his eyes were serene, which perhaps made him seem somewhat sleepy.

Since he had easily offered his hand in greeting, perhaps he really was a serene man.

“I simply bought them from a minstrel who just happened to stay in my village last year. He said he was marrying a dancing girl he met in Nyohhira and was returning to his hometown. He said that what he needed were no longer pens but ploughs.”

Minstreling and dancing were not jobs that someone could keep up forever. Lawrence had wondered before what people in those professions did once they were done offering bath-side entertainment, and now he knew an example.

That being said, the abbot had been the first to ask about the ink and whatnot that the lord had bought from the minstrel, so Lawrence had no choice but to give up on it. Just as he was thinking about having Holo wait patiently until they got to Atiph, the abbot spoke.

“But, Lord Beavery, it most certainly is God’s will that Sir Lawrence came to the inn looking for ink and paper.”

“What?”

When Lawrence asked that in response, Beavery, the abbot, and the innkeeper all looked to him with a smile.

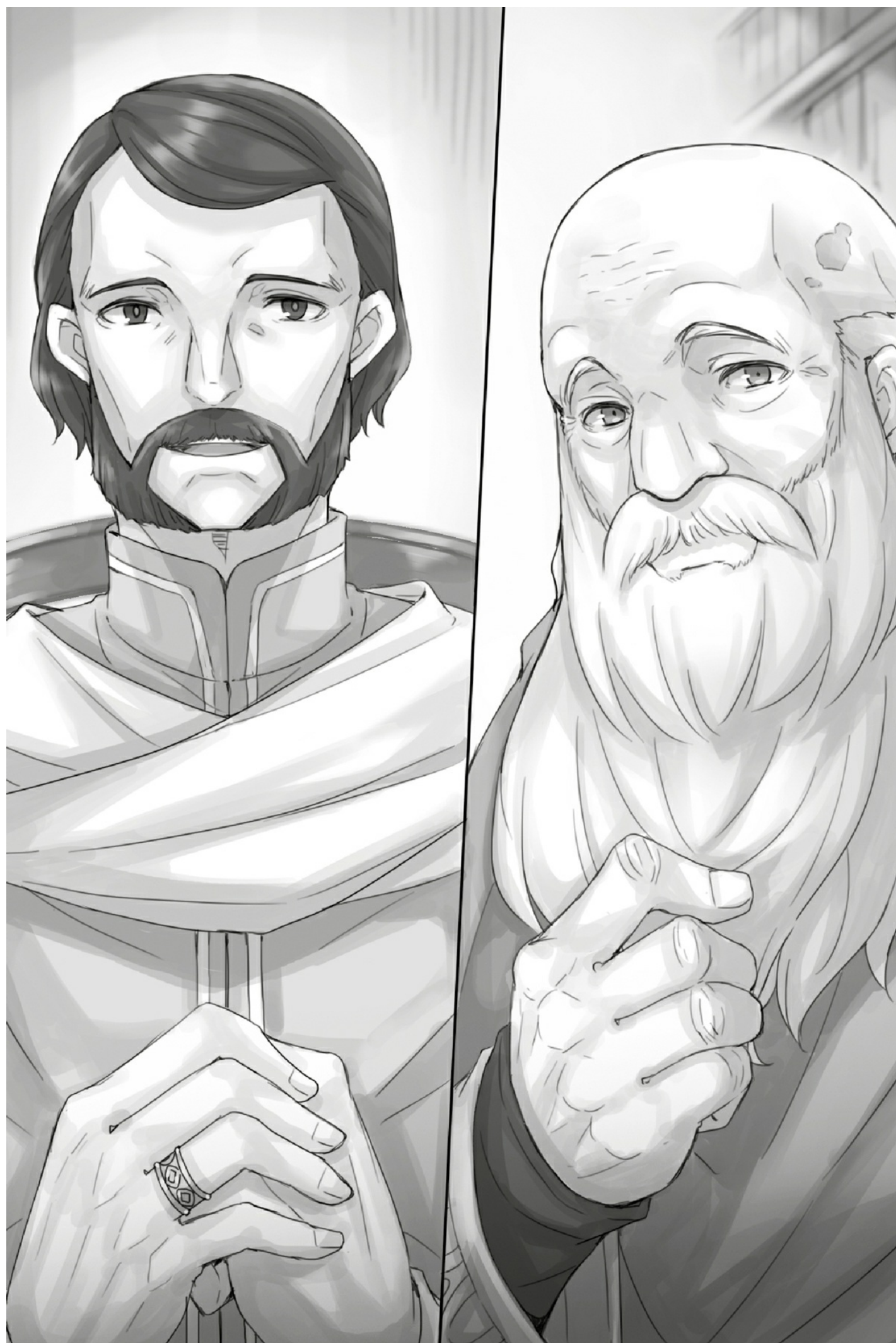
The innkeeper spoke first.

“Lord Beavery has been searching for help. It is very common that knowledgeable and learned people drop by here, after all.”

“Unfortunately, I am neither, but I think you would be perfect for the job, Sir Lawrence.”

When the abbot spoke, Beavery adjusted himself in his seat and looked straight at Lawrence. It was a display typical of those in power.

“I, Beavery, have devoutly prayed to God here in a land that was once deemed heretical territory. It is a pure stroke of good luck that I have come across you, Sir Lawrence, such a notable and skilled merchant, who has been quietly supporting the Debau Company.”



Lawrence was perplexed, unable to figure out where this was going at all, but Holo beside him was leisurely sipping on her drink, which meant that there was nothing dangerous about the situation.

Lawrence cleared his throat, straightened his posture, and replied:

“How could I possibly be of service to you, my lord?”

Beavery responded quietly. “Could you save my land from its plight? With that keen sense you have for trade?” the bearded, sleepy-looking lord implored and then looked to the abbot beside him. “I would like to present Sir Lawrence with some ink and paper as thanks. Would you mind?”

“Oh, of course not. I am sure that is what God desires as well.”

Beavery nodded and turned back to Lawrence.

“And so that is what I propose. What do you think?”

These were the urgent wishes of a neighboring lord. And since it seemed the shortage of ink and paper was spreading, there was no guarantee they would get any even if they went all the way to Atiph.

His merchant alarm bells were loudly ringing, wondering what sort of thing might be asked of him, but he could also feel silent pressure emanating from Holo. If he said *no* here, then he would have to be ready to sleep without Holo’s tail for quite a while.

“Very well. I will do all I can to help you.”

“Oh, how wonderful!”

Beavery stood, gripping Lawrence’s hand with both of his.

The abbot offered a prayer at the sight, and the innkeeper started to fill the cups for a toast.

Lawrence wore a wary smile fit for a merchant, but the situation still bothered him.

What in the world could a lord who frequented this inn be searching for?

While he felt uneasy, he also was curious.

They wanted his knowledge about trade, so he would draw upon all his past experiences.

“I’d like you to come to my land straightaway. I will treat you to the bounties of my—” The genial Beavery said that much before stopping and looking to the innkeeper. “Would that get in the way of your trade, keeper?”

Beavery seemed serious, but both the innkeeper and the abbot burst into laughter and shook their heads.

It seemed like Beavery was the type of lord who was beloved by many people. Even Holo, who was typically strict in her evaluations of people, seemed to be enjoying herself as she sat beside Lawrence.

“Then let us go before the sun sets. My manor is not far from here.”

When Beavery spoke, Lawrence respectfully lowered his head.

Beavery’s territory was truly not far from the inn. According to what Lawrence heard along the way, the inn was originally a lumber-cutting house that used to belong to the lord’s family.

The trees began to thin out, and just as they reached what looked like a small plain between forests, a pastoral village came into view.

As villagers passed Beavery and his lone horse guard, they greeted him casually.

There was a simple feel to the village with no cows or horses in sight and only a few pack mules milling about, but it seemed like a peaceful and well-governed village.

“Sir Lawrence, there’s a major problem I’d like you to take care of that’s giving the village’s head some trouble.”

That was what Beavery brought up as they made their way down a path that led between wheat fields, both of which had been fully harvested.

“Something that requires my knowledge of trade?”

“Very much so.”

Beavery offered a pleasant smile to a villager passing them on the way home

from farmwork before continuing.

“As a matter of fact, none of us, including myself, knows anything about trade, so we don’t know what to do...”

“But this village seems peaceful enough to me. It doesn’t seem like there are any problems.”

Most of the time, simply by stepping foot into a village, it was clear whether the people were deep in debt because they had caught the attentions of a wicked merchant or if they were plagued by heavy taxes under a tyrannical lord.

“Luckily, it’s not something that’s interrupting the villagers’ daily lives, but... that is the very reason why we have not been thinking seriously about it.” Beavery sighed. “Even in remote villages like this, when the currents of the world—or the waves, rather—reach us, people get tossed about. In a similar way, I, too, have started to lose confidence in my way of thinking.”

“What do you mean?”

When Lawrence asked, Beavery spoke with sad eyes, as though revealing shame within his family.

“It’s what we should do with this forest that supports my land and my people.”

“The forest?”

There was a glint in Holo’s eyes, tipsy from drinking wine at the inn.

“Yes. Just as the father abbot said, the world is forging ahead at a hurried pace, and we have been impacted by it. In essence—”

The modest-looking landlord’s home could now be seen, standing at the end of the road before the forest.

“We are arguing over how we might be able to get the greatest return from our forest,” the homely lord said, the expression on his face showing that he was truly at his wit’s end.

The dinner Beavery treated them to that night had the table lined with hare, quail, snipe, and goose.

It was not the large sort of meat meant to be preserved, like beef or pork, but instead the blessings of the mountains meant to be caught fresh every time, and the mere thought of eating something like this in a town would've caused gold coins to fly out of Lawrence's wallet.

Holo was of course absolutely delighted, but Lawrence only felt even greater pressure.

What Beavery told them as they sat around dinner did not sound like something that could be solved simply.

"Phew...I've not had meat quite so delicious in such a long time..."

Holo, laying on the bed with her hand on her stomach, swished her tail back and forth, wholly satisfied.

"The meat makes it clear—the forest behind this mansion is of exceptional quality. To think they might lay their hands on it to cut down the wood—it is the height of folly. The bearded one's point of keeping the trees where they are in the woods is worthy of note."

Lawrence, who sat on the corner of the bed, looked to Holo when she gave a quiet burp, and then looked back toward the candlelight and sighed.

"You may be right, but..."

"What, you side with the fools?"

Holo's words were rather stern because they were dealing with the future of a forest.

Even if it was not her own territory, she could not bear the thought of a bountiful forest being brought to ruin.

"I understand how the villagers feel when they say they want to cut down the trees and sell the wood."

"...Hmm?"

Holo opened one of her eyes to look at Lawrence.

"The war with the pagans ended, trade boomed, and a great many things shot up in price. That's also the reason why we've been so worried about the

shortage of small change in Nyohhira.”

Fresh in Lawrence’s mind was the memory of the bathhouse owners, hearing that he and Holo were headed on a trip, all approaching him and asking for help in exchanging their money for petty change.

“Among those, wood is in high demand for boats, carts, crates, and barrels, so it’s jumped up in price. Using this opportunity to cut some wood and make some money isn’t an unwise choice.”

Holo then rolled onto her side, propped her head up, and grumpily thumped her tail against the bed.

“Fool. Doing that would lay waste to such a beautiful forest. Have you forgotten how delicious that meat was?”

“I appreciate that position, too. The reason the village has been able to preserve such a relaxing atmosphere is probably thanks to how rich the forest is.”

“Mm. So you do understand.”

Holo seemed proud, as though she had been praised; she was probably a little drunk.

“Beavery seems like an understanding and good-natured lord. He said he has been generously allowing the villagers to gather mushrooms, honey, and even wild oats and rye from the forest. So even if the harvest fails, they never have to worry about food.”

“Aye. ’Tis not a bad thing...”

Holo spoke with half-lidded eyes. It was probably because she had just eaten and drank her fill, but she was also likely tired from being on the road for the first time in quite a while.

“But that being said, they can’t make a living without silver. The village needs to make money in order to purchase goods they can’t produce on their own.”

“Mm-hmm...But to cut down and sell the trees? What a daft plan...”

Holo’s head dropped from the support she was giving it.

She would soon go straight to curling herself up, so Lawrence stood with a sigh and began to remove the robe she still had on.

“Rrrgh...I do not mind sleeping like this...”

“Yes you do. You’ll damage the fabric.”

“Fool...”

Holo’s movements grew more sluggish as she spoke. It amazed him that she could act like this on one hand and on the other, insist that she was the wisewolf, a great being once worshipped as a god.

After he peeled the robe from her, he removed the pouch of wheat from around her neck and placed it by the pillow.

By then, she was already in the world of dreams, snoring softly.

“Really, what a handful.” Lawrence sighed, folded the robe, and then walked over to the window.

The nighttime autumn wind was a little cold on his skin, and the forest harbored a deep darkness despite the moonlight cast upon it.

“Cut trees will still grow back...so it’d be best to sell them at a high price while they can, huh?”

There were more than a handful of villagers who thought that way.

However, Beavery, who had managed this land for generations, was afraid that laying waste to the forest for such an impulsive leap would mean that they would no longer be able to rely on the blessings of the forest as they always had.

Even if that was a sort of religious view of the forest, it was not entirely groundless.

Even mushrooms would stop growing after a few years if uprooted entirely to sate greed. By cutting down the trees, the direction of the air currents would change, the flow of water would change, the plants would change, and so would the habitats of animals like the birds and the bees.

And it would take more than a generation before the trees would begin to

grow back.

In the end, there was ample reason to be cautious over whether they should take this shortcut.

But what if the value of lumber went down as they hemmed and hawed, only for the village to find itself beset by crop failure, or fire, or any other disaster that required a large amount of money?

He could imagine they would start quarrelling over how they should have sold the lumber earlier.

The landlord, Beavery, wanted to lessen the villagers' troubles while also preserving the lush forest for the future and putting some money on reserve for his territory.

Then what were they supposed to do?

Lawrence had been staring into the distance toward the nighttime forest, but he finally sighed and shut the window.

This was not a problem that would unravel itself after a bit of thinking. He would have to hear what the villagers had to say and, depending on the situation, even talk to the village chief or the community leaders directly.

Ultimately, Lawrence would say that this was more than a simple commerce issue, seeing as how it was a problem that had more to do with governance: accurately grasping the people's desires to find a point of compromise that would satisfy everyone. The very person who would be a great help at a time like this was Holo the Wisewolf.

As Lawrence thought about all that, he crossed his arms with a sigh to himself.

Holo was curled up and clinging to the blanket, snoring quietly.

"So this is why they call you the Great Wisewolf."

When he saw her peaceful sleeping face under the blanket, the corners of his mouth turned up in a smile.

After giving her a kiss on the cheek, he blew out the candle and crawled under the blanket himself.

For now, he would put everything aside for tomorrow.

Sleep came to him in an instant.

It was not as laudable as thanks for the meat they were treated to the night before or anything like that. Rather, it was the indignation that the abundant forest might be brought to ruin that spurred Holo into taking enthusiastic action.

“Hey, Holo...wait!”

Both Lawrence and, unusually, Holo woke up early to see the forest for themselves, but on the way there, Lawrence complained about Holo’s quick pace.

“What, did you drink too much last night?”

How someone walked was apparently more important than their strength or stamina when it came to trekking through the wilderness.

Holo’s gait was literally that of a wolf, and she practically flew across the ground. It was too much for Lawrence, who had settled down as a bathhouse owner, to keep up with.

“But you...*cough, cough*...Why are you getting so worked up?”

Lawrence’s breath caught, so he drank the cool water from his waterskin, and Holo looked back with her glinting red eyes.

“I am not getting worked up. I simply think that those who would dare to ruin a forest like this are irredeemably foolish!”

It would be useless pointing out that was exactly what being angry meant.

Lawrence sighed and took the wooden board he had under his arm in his hand. There was a layer of wax on it meant for writing with a pointed wooden pen.

On it were the detailed notes of how the villagers felt about the forest.

“Either way, the Beavery forest really does seem to go on forever. Here we have, um...the place where they harvest wild grains.”

Even rye and oats could be found in the forest. They were not as high quality

as properly farmed crops, but they could be useful for adding to the brewing process of ale or as feed for the pack animals.

“Mm. It has been moderately opened up so it has good sunlight, and since ’tis on a hill, the drainage is good. I could chase away the deer and the boars and promise to take care of the farming for a thousand years.”

Holo was the avatar of a wolf who resided in wheat, so that was very likely true.

“Some think that cutting the trees down here might not have too much of an impact.”

Lawrence thought that by widening the land, the villagers could expand their fields even more.

“Hmph, they truly are fools.” Holo, however, whirled around to look at this clearing in the woods as she spoke, almost like she had brushed away that line of thought with her tail. “Go ahead—cut down the trees around here. The wind will come with days of bad weather and mow down all the budding ears of wheat. Then, the only things that will thrive will be the short and needlessly fat, and those shoots will go on to barely produce anything. In a few years’ time, there will be nothing but thorny grasses that cannot be boiled or fried.”

Holo had lived for centuries in the wheat fields of a village, and before that, she had reigned over a region called Yoitsu, which was deeper into the mountains than even Nyohhira. There was no doubt that she had watched forests change for a span of time he could scarcely even imagine.

“I see. A long time ago, the people in a village I visited for trade were complaining about suddenly losing the blessings of the forest. I guess that’s what that means.”

“Aye. ’Tis a given for them, so ’tis not that I do not understand how they think: that their good fortune will persist no matter what they do. But the forest is more sensitive than the scales you trifle with.”

Holo crouched, took a piece of straw that had been left on the ground, and aimlessly flung it around like a child.

“Where to next?”

“A place east of here...Hmm?”

As Lawrence read out the notes of what he heard from the villagers, he raised his voice in surprise.

“What is it?”

“Well.” Lawrence turned the board to Holo. “It’s a caution for bees.”

There was still a hint of redness where he had been stung while harvesting a beehive.

He was rubbing an ointment kneaded from pig’s fat over it, and Holo, who was rubbing it over the places he could not reach, of course knew Lawrence’s pain.

But standing there was a gluttonous wolf.

“Do you mean we should take advantage of this opportunity?”

“No! I’m not collecting any more hives!”

If he did not refuse outright, then he would gradually be coaxed into harvesting another beehive.

Holo chuckled, bit into the straw she held in her hand, and pointed east.

“Then we shall head that way.”

Seeing how chipper Holo was made Lawrence feel tired for some reason as he followed after her.

Holo thankfully tread carefully down the path that descended the slight hill. She informed him about holes that were hidden by fallen leaves that made the ground look stable, gauged the direction of the wind, then found them an easy detour.

The forest grew denser and denser, and the air grew heavier and more damp.

There were plenty of evergreens here, and they blocked out the sun.

The occasional outburst of noise and the sound of snapping twigs were likely birds he could not see or squirrels and mice that just barely hid from view.

Plenty of acorns and other seeds were scattered around their feet, and a pig

would surely grow fat in an instant if they let one roam around here.

“The farther in we walk, the better this forest becomes,” Holo said with a sigh of admiration, and Lawrence agreed with a nod. “This explains why those in the village do not attend to their fieldwork too diligently,” she added.

“Hmm...It didn’t really seem like the fields in the village were in that sorry a state, though. Is that really the case?”

“They do not think much of it. After all, the villagers can find all the food they want simply by wandering in the forest, so of course ’tis inevitable. Well, because of that, I am even more confounded as to why they quibble over how to deal with the forest. Losing this would put so many in dire straits.”

Holo spoke as she followed a squirrel running atop a tree branch, and Lawrence responded.

“That’s because the blessings of the forest aren’t equal to everyone.”

“Hmm?”

Holo, who had switched from straw to a stick, smacked at a tree root, perhaps because she was bored, as she turned back to Lawrence.

When he crouched down, he found some herbs that were useful in relieving fever, and since Beavery had told them they could take what they wanted from the woods, he readily gathered some.

“Herbs like this, mushrooms, and nuts are useful to everyone. But human activity is complicated.”

Holo said nothing, but her eyes told him to continue.

As Lawrence walked beside her, he spoke.

“The blessings of the forest might be bountiful, but there are only so many things that can be changed into coins.”

“Honey and such?”

“Yeah. I think that’s the best example of food. You can sell ale and cider depending on what’s available, but if the water in the area isn’t any good, then they won’t even consider it. And when you’re so far away from civilization like

this, shipping will cost time and money. Liquids are heavy, so transporting the freight will be the costliest part of the process. If the taste isn't truly excellent, then it'll barely stand a chance at the market."

Holo wore a pensive expression, perhaps because she was recalling her mercantile journey with Lawrence.

"Also, they could bring sheep and pigs from town to let them graze here, but distance is still the main problem at the end of the day."

Something happened right as he was speaking about that.

Holo suddenly stretched out her neck and looked deeper into the forest.

"What is it?"

"...The smell of coal."

For a moment, he was worried it might be a wildfire, but Holo did not seem flustered. And he realized right away what was causing it.

"It's traces of the roasting that makes charcoal."

There was a small mound of dirt.

To make charcoal, firewood was usually piled together with wet leaves on the ground, then set on fire. This pile would be covered by dirt, leaving only a vent or pipe open in the middle to let the air through. After that, all they needed to do was to let it sit for a night or two.

"Everyone needs coal, but there are people who need it more than others."

"...A butcher, perhaps?"

Lawrence could not help but snort in amusement, which earned a glare from Holo.

"Sorry, sorry. Meat slowly grilled over coal is delicious."

Holo looked away in a huff and then dug up the remains of the charcoal mound with her stick.

"The people who use coal the most are blacksmiths."

"Ahhh...Those who constantly burn fuel in the woods, making metallic noises,

no?”

“Those are probably much larger smithies. But yeah, something like that.”

“So are they the ones asking for trees to be cut down?”

Holo’s eyes turned to the wooden board he had in hand.

“Sometimes. Especially considering how expensive fuel is now, it makes sense that metal goods are also going up in price. With a forest as fertile as this, they might think of it as a good chance to get rich.”

“How miserly.”

“Don’t let opportunity slip by, they say.”

Holo huffed and then sighed.

“Generally, like I said before, it’s hard to turn all the blessings the villagers are so lucky to receive from the forest into money. But that doesn’t mean that those blessings can be shared with everybody.”

The biggest moneymakers would be the woodcutters who would be the ones chopping down the trees and the cargo handlers who would carry the lumber. Next in line would be the charcoal burners and the blacksmiths. Of course, not all of them would be able to pocket their profits. They would naturally have to pay taxes to Beavery, and that would go into the village’s savings.

But that would soon give birth to a pride that belonged only to those who had earned the village a great deal of money in the first place, and a distinct pecking order would come into existence.

Though they did not engage in moneymaking businesses, the hunters and gatherers who brought much-appreciated variety to the villagers’ dinner tables and those who sweated in the fields would certainly not find that very amusing. What Beavery feared more than the devastation of the forest was unrest in the village.

“There has to be an easier way to make money.”

“Mm.” Holo closed her eyes, as though listening closely to her surroundings, then spoke. “Indeed. What about furs?”

Holo was the embodiment of a wolf, and occasionally wolf furs lined the stalls at the market. It was a delicate subject, but Holo was the one who had brought it up, so he had to answer.

“Furs are one of the very few things that can be exchanged for money, but... most of the hunters agree with cutting down the trees.”

Holo furrowed her brow.

“It’d be easier for them to chase their prey, so they want the trees gone.”

“...”

Holo dropped her shoulders in astonishment and whacked a tree trunk with the stick she held.

“Humans are nothing but fools.”

“But the furriers are against cutting down the trees, so I guess they just balance each other out.”

“...Hmm?”

Holo seemed perplexed. She likely did not understand why the furriers would be opposed to it.

The more animals the hunters hunted, the more work the furriers got.

Lawrence explained the workings of the human world to her.

“You need to tan hides and fur, right? So they need a place deep in the woods for that. That’s why...Oh, right. I guess that’s what they mean by *beware of bees*.”

When he looked at the trees growing around them, he realized something.

“Oh, well. I guess it’s not the kind of bees that you want to see.”

“*Blech*...The kind that swarm over cows?”

She was talking about the bloodsucking botfly. It seemed like it was only the insects that escaped the control of the wolves, the kings of the forest. Holo wore an expression of disgust.

“No, the kind that swarm trees.”

“’Tis...not that? Bees that collect syrup? Those are everywhere.”

The beehive they had acquired not too long ago was also a collection of nectar from trees full of sap.

But insects used trees in various ways.

“The kind that build their homes inside the trees. Haven’t you seen the weird seeds growing on the trees?”

Holo looked at him blankly, then nodded vaguely.

“Aye...occasionally. The kind that grow directly from the tree branches, no? But to call those ‘seeds’...they are odd gnarls in the wood. They are not meant for eating.”

She stuck out her tongue and scrunched up her face; maybe she had eaten one before.

“Those grow because that’s where the bees lay their eggs. It’s a cradle, you could say.”

Holo, who was so disgusted by insects parasitically devouring other insects that it made her cry, went pale as she learned that fact. But since she also sang praises about how delicious bee larva was, her curiosity seemed to win out.

“And? What does that have to do with furs?”

“Plenty. Furriers cut off those knobs, steep them in water, and boil the stuff, then tan the hides with the resulting liquid.”

“Ohhh. And so...I see. A stack of furs is wonderful but not without any material to tan it with.”

“Exactly. And fur is one of the few goods that can be readily sold for cash. It’s the greatest influence in this village when it comes to saving the forest.”

Holo nodded and looked at him as though they had finally seen the light, but she then seemed to notice something.

“But, dear, between the furs and the lumber, which will produce the most money?”

He expected nothing less from the wisewolf—no, from the wife of a former

merchant.

“Definitely the lumber, without a doubt.”

Holo huffed, disappointed, and tossed away her stick.

Then, as she looked around her, she folded her arms almost like she was the ruler of the forest. Even she understood that the promise of gaining a bigger profit held more weight.

“But like I said this morning, we need your wisdom.”

They had come into the forest with the ray of hope that they might find something of monetary value rivaling lumber that could support the furriers’ position, but it was not going so well.

Just as Lawrence knew the ins and outs of a market, the villagers here had been living alongside this forest ever since they were born. It would have been arrogant to think that he alone might notice something that they had not.

“Hmm...I can speak to the merits of keeping the forest whole and the ill effects that would come from knocking down the trees...”

“That, or we could *peel away a layer* off you.”

When Lawrence said that, Holo pouted and her ears and tail swayed in discontent.

“’Tis this current form of mine that has no layers to peel back.”

“Then, maybe it’d be more accurate to say that we should put another layer of fur on you?”

Holo’s true identity was that of a massive, towering wolf. If the villagers caught a glimpse of her enormous shadow and heard her howling at the moon, the king of the dark forests might be able to strike some fear into them.

If they feared her anger, then it was possible they might also refrain from touching the trees in the forest.

“...But I shall be troubled if a weak little girl or some other gets sent into the forest. I cannot always come here to this wood.”

For people who were aware of the old ways that had long existed before the

Church's teachings spread, it was a given what they should do when confronted with the wrath of not just the king of the forest but also the spirits that inhabited the mountains and springs. Lawrence could already imagine Holo in her wolf form, flustered by a sobbing girl who had been offered as a human sacrifice. He found the image kind of comical, but he couldn't laugh. Moreover, if the people came to fear the forest and no longer went in it, then that would just create an even bigger problem. They would be getting their priorities mixed up if they created a situation where no one dared touch the blessings of the forest in order to preserve it.

"Eloquence is rather your specialty, is it not?"

He didn't want to hear that from Holo, who begged for food using all sorts of tricks, and apparently, it showed on his face.

Holo approached him, very deliberately stepped on his foot, then walked a few paces away and crossed her arms.

"'Tis your specialty, is it not?"

"Yes, it is," he responded with a sigh as he groaned.

"Mmmm...It just comes down to money, doesn't it...? I can't believe it's such a rich forest, and none of it is worth any money..."

The villagers in Beavery's territory had also likely heard the rumors, but if anyone headed south down the river, they would easily see the current state of the world for themselves. Everywhere, trade was erupting, and all the lumber that people needed to fuel their businesses was being sent down the river. It would be more unusual to not think about taking part and sharing in those gains.

Lawrence personally thought that it would be fine if they ruined a small part of the forest, cutting down some trees to earn some money.

The reason he did not say that out loud was for Holo's sake.

She had a short temper whenever it came to the woods, and the greater reason he offered to help Beavery in the first place was to get a small share of ink and paper so she could continue to write about their journey.

And of course, the ever-shrewd Holo had not forgotten that.

The wind blew through the trees, and after spending a moment staring up at the swaying canopy hanging above them, Holo spoke.

“I cannot fight against large currents, either. If the human world wishes for shiny coins, then I cannot go against them.”

“Holo?”

“And one requires silver and gold to write, no? In that case, I cannot think it right to stand in the way of villagers who wish to make some money. They have things they want, just as I do.”

Naturally, the people of the village were not intending to sell lumber so they could buy luxuries. They simply did not want to miss the good opportunity to gain some valuable coins.

If the village built up their savings, then they could have the option of leaving the village during a crop failure to buy produce in a nearby town, and they could secure the metal tools they needed for their forest and farmwork. Or perhaps they could set up a new water mill at the creek nearby. Money directly improved these people’s lives and made them richer.

Just as the scripture said that people could not live on bread alone, the villagers could not cover everything with the blessings of the earth alone.

Holo stood limply by the charcoal-burning remains, as though she, too, had been burned to ashes.

“I thought I had given up on protecting the forests such a long, long time ago,” Holo said with a bitter smile and came to Lawrence’s side.

Instead of stomping on his foot, she grasped his hand.

“Just as you found it difficult to start a fire and now grip the reins too tightly after setting off on your first journey in years, I, too, have steeped in the baths for too long and have forgotten about the ways of the world.”

Sometimes, one simply had to pretend to look away when the world did not turn out as one hoped.

Both Lawrence, who had walked the path of a merchant, and Holo, who had

no choice but to stand by and watch as the times changed, were keenly aware of this.

Lawrence gripped Holo's small hand in return, leaned over, and kissed the base of her wolf ears.

"At the very least, Beavery is a kind lord. He probably won't go overboard as the ruler of this land."

"...Mm."

Holo nodded, and like a clingy cat, she pressed her face into his chest.

The wishes of Holo and Lord Beavery, who both prayed for the peace of the forest, could not come true.

Lord Beavery was a compassionate man—if Lawrence apologized perfectly and presented him with that massive beehive as an apology, then he might still share some ink and paper.

When his train of thought got that far, inspiration struck him.

"Right. If we took the ink and paper from Lord Beavery, we could sell it at a high price for him, and that might help."

Either way, there were not many people who could read and write in such a remote country town.

If it was all just going to rot away, unused, then they should have at least thought about exchanging it for money.

To make up for failing in the request he so readily accepted, it might be better if Lawrence could turn that into silver.

When he explained all that, Holo smiled wryly.

"Even if you fell over, you would not get up for free."

"I am a merchant, after all," he said in a joking manner, and Holo chuckled, then sighed.

"Then first, we must go to apologize, yes? We may not be having any delicious meat tonight."

"Could you write down your memories of our trip on some tree bark for now,

like on this board? We'll buy some paper and ink when we get the chance."

"Mm. Or would that charcoal there be of any use?"

When Holo said that, Lawrence looked to the remains.

"Charcoal alone would blur immediately. I've seen it being used as a substitute for ink by mixing it with glue, but in order to make glue, you need to boil bones and animal tendons for a long time. And then you also need trees from the forest...or something like that."

"Well, 'tis no help at all!"

Lawrence could not help but smile at Holo's deliberate yell.

"But, dear," she said. "Then how is the ink I always use made?"

"Hmm? Well, you boil these nubs from trees that are shaped like seeds called gallnuts. These nubs are also used to tan hide...Huh?"

"Oh?"

Both Holo and Lawrence looked at each other.

"Dear," Holo said, and a taut smile crossed Lawrence's face.

"...The knowledge might be in my head, but I can't always take it out at will."

"Much like your purse."

They're not the same, is what he wanted to say, but he could not help but smile when he saw Holo's eyes glittering with anticipation and her tail swishing back and forth.

"The villagers probably haven't noticed the possibility, either."

The only one who could read and write was the landowner Beavery. Or perhaps Beavery himself could not even do it. It was a common thing for places far away from towns, so there was not much they could do if the idea had not been in their heads to begin with.

"They said that ink had gotten rather expensive because of little Col and Myuri, no?"

"Yeah. And you need a dense forest in order to guarantee a lot of gnarls on

the trees.”

“Dear.” Holo grinned.

The world was occasionally like this, too.

“This idea will protect the forest while still being useful to the villagers at the same time. If they can produce a lot of the expensive ink, then they can make more money for a much longer time than from lumber, which stops being useful once the tree’s cut.”

“And it means ink for me!”

Lawrence left the forest side by side with Holo, told Beavery of the sequence of events and how to make ink and its price range. Ink was an excellent product where a small amount brought in a large sum of money; unlike alcohol, they could expect plenty of profit even after taking it to faraway places, and even children could gather and process the gallnuts. It was hard to differentiate between the people who could and could not contribute to earning money, so they could avoid the creation of an odd discord within the village.

“I expected nothing less from the renowned Sir Lawrence!”

Beavery treated him with excessive acclaim and lined their dinner table that night with another fabulous meal.

Holo wrote down right away what they had to eat that day with the ink Beavery gave her, and when Lawrence peeked at her writing as she dozed off in her seat from all the alcohol, he saw his name and the sentence, *The fool is sometimes of use*.

“You can leave the *fool* part out.”

Lawrence smiled wryly, scooping Holo up from where she dozed in her chair, and carried her to bed.

Once he put the eternal princess to bed, he returned to the moonlit bundles of paper.

These would be filled with even more words in the future.

Sometimes the stories would be exciting and sometimes not so exciting.

“But they’ll all be good memories,” Lawrence murmured as he placed his hand on the window.

He closed it, just as though he was closing a book.

That was only one scene of their long, long journey.

THE EGGS OF
A JOURNEY
AND WOLF



THE EGGS OF A JOURNEY AND WOLF

The breeze that day was slightly chilly.

It had been almost two weeks since they left behind the hot spring village of Nyohhira to go on their trip. Since it had been over ten years since the former merchant Lawrence had last traveled, he stumbled a bit at the beginning, but he had finally gotten his traveling senses back.

The winding mountain roads had come to an end, leaving them on a road that crossed a flat plain with nothing to obstruct their view, and they were fully enjoying the mundanity of travel.

“Yaaaaaawn.”

But the source of that massive yawn was not Lawrence. Behind him was Holo, his partner, lying across a pile of blankets in the cart bed. She had been enjoying some elegant sunbathing the whole day.

“Dear, are we...yaaawn...there yet...?”

The air was chilly, suggestive of autumn, but the sunshine on the fields around them still carried hints of summer.

Nothing could compare to how nice it felt to have the cool breeze caress his cheek after sweating slightly from the sun.

Holo, who would take naps whenever she had the chance even in Nyohhira, was relaxing as she pleased.

But today, she was especially lax, rolling about on her blankets like a house pet.

The reason for that could be found in the barrel she held.

She had scooped out some honey from the beehive they just so happened to get in the forest a few days ago and had added it to her wine. She then placed the cask under the blankets, and after a few days, her ready-to-drink mead was

complete.

She had woken up rather early today and quickly undid the stopper on the cask she had put away. Once she grew tipsy enough after lapping up some of the mead, she would doze off, then lap up some more once she woke, repeating that over and over.

It was the height of luxury.

“Almost. Once we merge with the highway, there will be more people passing us. Be careful.”

“Fool...I am not that much of...a...”

The rest of her sentence vanished in her mumbles. Lawrence glanced over his shoulder to see Holo had fallen asleep faceup, mouth half-open.

Holo looked like a girl of fourteen or fifteen if she kept her mouth shut, but this slovenly attitude also suited her. It was almost poetic how her flaxen-colored hair glittered in the sunlight and her bangs rustled softly in the wind.

But if that were all, then they would have had no reason to mind the gazes of others. She would have simply been an energetic girl enjoying her travels.

The problem was that unfortunately, Holo was not just any girl.

It was not only her beautiful flaxen hair that shone in the sun and danced in the wind. She had large, triangular wolf ears on her head and a tail with thick fur and a beautiful lay grew from her rear.

Holo was the avatar of a wolf who resided in wheat, whose true form was massive, and who would live in dignity for centuries.

At least...that was what she called herself.

“Good grief...”

Lawrence sighed when he saw her innocent sleeping face, but he could not help a corner of his mouth raising in a smile.

She called herself the wisewolf, and her wisdom and insight were truly impressive, but when she acted silly like this, he grew weak.

“What a handful.”

He mumbled to himself with a wry smile, and he was not sure exactly who that was meant for.

Lawrence shrugged, and when he took a piece of jerky from the small linen bag beside him and placed it in his mouth, his eyes dropped to the bundle of paper spread open below it. The pages were jam-packed with writing about their daily occurrences, written by Holo, who was snoozing in the back, who worked hard every day to pen everything.

Since Holo would live for an eternity, no matter how hard he tried, Lawrence would end up leaving his beloved wife behind in this world. That was why Lawrence had suggested she write down as many things as she could—enough for her to forget the beginning by the time she had finished reading it to the end—for when that sad moment finally came.

Holo had eagerly taken on the project since then, and of course Lawrence should have been happy about that, but there was a hard point to settle.

Holo had evidently come to enjoy writing on its own, so she grew pleased with writing about imaginary days that never happened. It was like the hobby of a dreamy noble girl who lived in a monastery, and when she did things like that, she used up her stationery in an instant.

Not too long ago, she had run out of ink and paper. Luckily, at the time, there was a lord they had just so happened to meet who was generous enough to share some with them. Lawrence could not even begin to guess how much she was going to make him buy down the road.

While he was willing to do anything he could for her, at his core, Lawrence was a merchant. He could not help but look at a huge stack of papers and immediately think of the equivalent stack of silver coins.

But he also understood how Holo felt as she scribbled away. Memories were hazy things, and no matter how many words she used to put something on paper, it was impossible to record exactly how pleasant an afternoon nap was in its entirety.

Lawrence wanted to let her do as she pleased so she could at least gather some of those fragments together.

In the end, Holo would be left alone in the flow of time.

When he thought of that, Lawrence found another murmur slipping from his lips.

“There has to be a better way.”

He meant that both in the way of being able to collect more memories but also in an economical sense.

As he contemplated all that, he saw a notice board standing at the end of the flat road.

It was a signpost that marked its intersection with the highway, and it also meant they were close to their destination.

Commotion would erupt if people saw Holo’s ears and tail.

Lawrence turned around to face the cart bed to wake the sleeping princess.

“Hey, Ho—”

“Town?!”

Lawrence flew back in surprise when Holo energetically leaped up; the horse, feeling its reins pulled, whinnied in discontent.

Holo, however, paid no mind in the slightest and pulled the hood on her robe up, and then she leaped from the cart to the driver’s perch.

There had been no time to put away the pouch that sat next to Lawrence. Holo snatched it up, and the jerky found its way into her mouth.

“’Tis been quite a while since our last big town. We must eat as much delicious food as we can!”

Only a few days had passed since they feasted on the mountain’s bounty at a long banquet table while visiting a lord’s manor, and she had been drinking her fresh, luxurious mead all day, but...he knew no matter what he said, it wouldn’t change a thing.

And when he saw how merry she was, Lawrence lost the will to be cross with her.

Lawrence smiled with a sigh, readjusted himself on the driver’s perch, and

gripped the reins.

He could not control the heartless flow of time.

That was why, at the very least, he would carefully drive the cart for the one he loved.

They headed straight west from the mountain hot spring village of Nyohhira and followed the river downstream.

At the end of their path would be the port town of Atiph, home to a cathedral and an archbishop and large enough to be considered the biggest town in the area.

It was a historic place that had once been the front line in the war with the pagans, and it also acted as a gatekeeper so that pirates from the northern islands could not attack the heart of the continent.

Holdovers from that past were still visible as the massive spires rising high above both sides of the river could be seen throughout the town. Strung between them was a huge chain that would drop into the river at times of emergency to stop pirate ships from going upstream.

After passing through inspection at the city walls, Lawrence explained all that, but Holo's attention was stolen by the food in the stalls as she gave vague responses.

"Maybe you'd listen to me if I put that chain around your neck."

Holo's true form was a massive, towering wolf, so perhaps chains that big would be the perfect size. Lawrence muttered that as he thought about it, and Holo, who would not miss a comment like that, stomped on the top of his foot.

"So what sort of special dishes may we find here?"

"Sheesh...", Lawrence responded as he rubbed his foot. "Fish, of course. This place is crammed to the brim with fresh raw fish. Especially at this time of year, now that it's starting to get cold, all the fish are super fatty and delicious. All the salt-grilled, deep-fried, and boiled fish would be good, too."

"Fiiish?"

Holo said it with a slight objection, almost as though she wanted to say that

wolves and fish did not go together.

“You can’t just say you don’t like it. Oh yeah, there’s been word about an interesting trade here in this town regarding herring. Do you want to go see?”

“No. I shan’t look at cured herring ever again.”

For people living in the deep mountains—catches from local rivers aside—the fish people would commonly find on their tables would be, without question, cured salted herring. Herring were so abundant that it was often said that sticking a sword in the sea would be more than enough to catch a whole cluster of them, so even those living in the deepest of mountain regions could get them cheaply.

It was a precious fish that supported a great many people throughout the world, but because of that, everyone grew bored of it.

“Herring is pretty good when it’s not cured.”

“...This is how you are scheming to fill my belly with cheap fish, I see,” Holo said, looking at him with suspicion.

She grew greedy when it came to food, so Lawrence could do nothing but shrug.

That being said, herring was still cheaper than any sort of meat.

Lawrence cleared his throat.

“Let’s say you prepare plenty of oil in a pot.”

“...Hmm?”

“First you put the heat on low, and then you put in a gutted fish, head and all. Then it should start making a slight fizzing noise.”

Holo looked at him doubtfully, wondering what he was talking about, but Lawrence paid her no mind and continued speaking.

“Just as you can tell that it’s finally starting to cook through, you add more firewood into the fire. The oil will get hotter and hotter, and then it’ll start making a really pleasant sizzling sound.”

Holo was completely enraptured by Lawrence’s story, and she audibly gulped.

“When you fry it until it’s crisp and crunchy, you can eat it to the bone. You then scoop it from the oil and sprinkle some salt over it just as it starts to burst open...”

He mimed sprinkling salt with his fingers, and Holo’s gaze darted to them, like a cat being offered a treat.

“Then you bite into the head.”

Holo’s tail sprang up, almost enough to lift the hem of her clothes.

“There’s no greater enjoyment than tasting the sweet oil dripping down your lips along with the rock salt and then washing it down with some cool ale...Ow, ow!”

“We must go right now. Herring, yes? They are in peak season now, are they not?!”

Holo had a tight grip on his muscles through his clothes, and he somehow managed to peel her off.

It seemed like his strategy of filling her up with cheap herring was working, but it was working a little too well.

“Before we do that, we need to head to the Debau Company to confirm our destination and reserve a boat. The seasons are changing now, so the hold will be stuffed full of merchant and material transport. We’ll have to wait until winter if we don’t hurry.”

Unlike his time as a traveling merchant, Lawrence and Holo now had a place to return to. Their hot spring in Nyohhira was currently in the hands of someone else, so they could not take too leisurely of a trip.

And so, even though he had not said that out of spite, Lawrence found himself cut off in the middle of speaking.

Holo’s eyes were swimming as she bit her lower lip.

“...Fine, fine. I’ll go on ahead to the company, so you take this and buy as much as you want.”

What he handed her after he spoke was a silver of not terribly great quality that he had scooped out from his wallet after a moment of hesitation. When

they had just met, he had given her a silver *trenni*, which was as close to pure silver as coins could get, and she ended up purchasing all the apples she could.

The word *frugality* seemed to fly out the window in the face of good food.

But just as Holo took the silver with sparkling eyes, she gave Lawrence a beaming smile; even though he knew that was her weapon, it shot him right in the heart.

This was all he could say to vent his chagrin:

“My share is included in that silver, okay?”

“I know, fool.”

She was already searching for the food stalls when she responded. She wore a thick skirt to hide her tail, but it was wagging so much that it was almost moving her skirt.

“Oh boy...”

Holo looked like she would dash off the moment she spotted her prey, so he was about to add where they should meet when—

“Hmm?”

Holo, who had been licking her lips, suddenly stuck out her neck.

“What is it?”

“Mm.”

Her ears moved tightly under her hood, and without turning her head, she brought her hand over to pull on Lawrence’s sleeve.

“Behind you, on the other side of the street.”

Holo was the embodiment of a wolf, and wolves were the kings of the forest. Even among the busiest of crowds, or even when her heart was stolen away by fried fish, she was always on her guard.

“...Do you think this means trouble?”

The cart was filled with cargo, and the street was crowded.

Even if they did not lose everything to a pickpocket or a holdup, they would

not escape unscathed.

Those traveling with women were especially easy targets.

“They do not carry weapons, but...they are the same sort we often see in our baths.”

“Priests? Wait, don’t tell me you—”

When he said that, Holo’s expression became a clearly guilty one.

“Perhaps I drank too much mead...”

Holo was the embodiment of a wolf, which made her a nonhuman with wolf ears and a tail. The Church considered those like her to be possessed by demons, beings that should not exist in this world.

She had been getting drunk off mead all day long, and coupled with how she had been letting her guard down on her first trip in a while, someone might have seen her ears and tail along the way.

Holo bit on the nail of her thumb, gripped the silver Lawrence gave her, then spoke.

“It is what it is. They will be after me either way, so my only choice is to run. You prepare the boat and head south as planned. Should I run along the coast, we will likely meet up at some town along the way.”

“Yeah, but...”

“Please.”

The reason Holo was called the wisewolf was because she could promptly choose the correct option in a time of crisis. He could not count the number of times her quick wit had saved him.

Yet, even though Lawrence understood that Holo’s assessment was absolutely correct, he hesitated because he hated the thought of being without her.

She would only become annoyed if he said that, of course, and he knew that a reunion after being separated would not be an awful thing.

“Don’t drink away that silver.”

“You fool,” Holo said with a smile and then leaped from the driver’s perch on the cart. Just as she did so, the small group of people whispering among themselves on the other side of the street started to part the crowd and make their way toward them. Some were dressed in clerical robes, some were well-dressed merchants, and there were even some who looked like monks.

Lawrence took a deep breath, mentally taking on the role of someone who simply happened upon Holo in his travels. A shameless performance was the perfect chance for a former merchant to show off his skill.

And due to his business, he had made connections with people in relative positions of power. If things got bad, he could just rely on them, so there was no need to be too worried.

Just as he watched Holo off as he thought about all that, a word reached his ears that sounded entirely out of place.

“Please wait! Could you perhaps be Lady Myuri?!”

“Huh?”

It was not just Lawrence but Holo, who was trying to disappear into the crowd, who was shocked by this, and she stopped in her tracks.

That was because they had just heard the name of Lawrence and Holo’s only daughter.

“...Dear?”

Perplexed, Holo looked up to Lawrence for his decision.

Lawrence briefly showed his palm to Holo and then turned to look at the group approaching them.

He watched as they shrank back as they tried to make their way through the crowd, being yelled at by short-tempered artisans and greedy-looking merchants—if this was an act, then they were going quite overboard. They did not seem like bad people.

At the very least, it did not seem like they were rushing them to kill a pagan god.

“Maybe we should listen to them.”

And with a sigh, Lawrence continued.

“We should probably pick up what we can to see what that tomboy’s been up to.”

The girl inherited Holo’s blood, after all..., Lawrence thought, and he left it as just a thought.

Once some of the priests rushed over to the couple and saw Holo from the front, they immediately knew they had made a mistake.

“Your...your hair...?”

Holo’s hair was a flaxen color that matched the autumn forest, but the hair of their daughter, Myuri, was a beautiful silver from Lawrence’s strong blood. They could not be mistaken for each other.

“Hmm? What might it be?”

Still not quite grasping the situation, they decided to keep it quiet that Myuri was their daughter for now.

When Holo responded with feigned ignorance, they hurriedly righted themselves.

“O-our apologies. Might you perhaps be...?”

They asked again like it was their last hope, and Holo tilted her head with a smile.

As their shoulders dropped in disappointment, they still stared hard at Holo’s face as though they were not giving up.

“She really looks just like her, though...”

“Truly, yes, truly.”

“Um, are you her sister?”

Holo slowly shook her head—she was her mother, not her sister.

On the other hand, Lawrence could see her tail happily flicking back and forth at what they said.

She was several centuries old, and she never seemed to age at all when she

was in her human form. Regardless, she did not appear particularly unhappy to be mistaken for someone the same age as her daughter. No matter how long she lived, a maiden was still a maiden.

“I never thought there could be someone out there who resembled her so closely...”

They were all sighing with admiration, so Lawrence cut in.

“And what is happening with this Lady Myuri?”

The original goal of Lawrence and Holo’s trip was to see their only daughter, Myuri.

When Col, the young man who had worked at the house for years, set off, spurred on by his faith, Myuri had forced him to take her with him.

The two were evidently causing great commotion throughout the world as they traveled, but their communications had stopped coming. Holo said there was nothing to worry about, but Lawrence felt uneasy, so they were going to check on Myuri’s safety.

“Lady Myuri? Er...pardon us, but have you two recently come to the area?”

“Yes. We usually run a humble inn secluded in the mountains...This is the first time in a while that we’ve come to town.”

It was not a lie, and that was also clear from his dress. Because of how long they had lived in the mountains, both Holo and Lawrence wore thicker clothes that stood out from the crowd.

“I see. Then, you might not know.” The one dressed in priest robes cleared his throat. “Are you aware that the world is in the midst of a great wave of people searching for true and proper faith?”

“Errr...yes. Somewhat...”

It was originally a big fight between a country called the Winfiel Kingdom and the pope, who was the head of the Church.

For several long years, the Church had been collecting taxes under the pretext of punishing the pagans, but even after years passed since the conclusion of the war, they were still collecting the same taxes.

The Winfiel Kingdom speaking up about how odd that was had been what started it all, leading to the masses crying out about their dissatisfaction with how the Church had accumulated excessive wealth and other degenerate behavior of many clergy.

The flames of reform were lighting here and there, and the priests were in utter confusion.

There had even been trouble in Nyohhira, where plenty of high-ranking clergy came as guests.

“The Church in this town had also lost sight of the path of faith. It was Sir Col, the Twilight Cardinal, and Saint Myuri, who supports him, who showed us a new path.”

Saint Myuri.

Lawrence and Holo reflexively exchanged glances.

The Myuri they knew well was a tomboy who would run around the wild mountains half-naked, catching frogs and snakes and whatnot with bare hands and a straight face, tie them up with string, then toss them in a lake to fish up enormous catfish.

She was quite far from a saint.

“And it is said that the first time Sir Col and Lady Myuri gained God’s blessing was here in this town. This is where it all began.”

The middle-aged monk smiled proudly.

Lawrence remembered that something similar had been written in their letter.

“But we heard that the Twilight Cardinal and Lady Myuri had headed south. We were just thinking about how we might leave behind just a bit of the memory of the miracle here.”

Holo reacted slightly when he said “*leave behind just a bit of the memory.*” It was these priests who ordinarily handled chronicling all the events of the world.

“We then heard that a woman who looks exactly like Lady Myuri passed through the city wall, so we rushed over. We knew that this must be God’s will.”

“Erm...uh...”

Regardless of Lawrence and Holo exchanging glances, one of the priests signaled to one of the rather well-dressed merchants with a look. The merchant began to peel away the cloth that was wrapped around a large, square board that he cradled with care.

“We, servants of the Church, ordered this and it finally came today. And when we think that a woman like you came to town on this day, there is no doubt that this has been God’s guidance.”

Then, when the wrappings on the board fell away, Lawrence’s and Holo’s eyes widened.

“What do you think? With this, anyone can tell at a glance what sort of miracle this town was blessed with!”

What they showed them was a single painting.

Because of the clouded sky and the rocky mountain setting, the whole tone of the painting was rather dark.

However, rays of dawn peeked through the clouds in the distant background, and a young adult man was reaching out to it. A pious-looking girl quietly prayed beside him, and angels with trumpets in their hands were floating around them...It was a common composition, but the two in the picture were clearly Col and Myuri.

“Well? As the place where it all started, we are even thinking about having a large ceiling mural based on this painting commissioned in the Atiph church.”

The workmanship on the painting was eye-catching, so Lawrence wondered less about the craftsmanship and more about the price.

Paints were so expensive that it was like cutting jewels open.

When he shook his head in disbelief, the priests interpreted that gesture to mean that he was stirred on a spiritual level, and they looked at him proudly.

“In about ten days, the Church will hold an unveiling of the painting and a gathering for prayer. Please, we would appreciate it if you came as well. You will surely attain wonderful spiritual fulfillment and find protection for your

travels to come.”

When that invitation came with a friendly smile, it was hard to say no.

With no other choice, Lawrence gave his agreement with an absent response, and the priests gripped both his and Holo’s hands with great joy, then left with a spring in their steps.

Lawrence, now left behind, was still not fully satisfied, but he suddenly noticed the rather serious look on Holo’s face.

Holo was a survivor of the age of the forests and spirits, one called the Wisewolf of Yoitsu. Perhaps she found it unforgivable that a picture of her daughter, who inherited her blood, would be hung on the walls of a church that the humans so worshipped.

“Dear,” Holo said, her voice low.

“Holo, now just wait a minute—”

This was also a trend of the times. He wanted to tell her to think of it as a painting of someone else who simply happened to look similar, but she cut him off.

“Listen, dear.”

“What?”

“I want one, too!”

Still looking in the direction the priests had gone off in, Holo grabbed Lawrence’s arm.

Her wolf parts were in a dancing fit under her skirt and her hood.

She looked at him and said, red eyes sparkling, “Have a painting of us done, too!”

The wisewolf Holo never aged, and she would look like a girl for eternity. She was by nature incompatible with the flow of time in the human world, and she would inevitably be left behind, alone. That was why she could only record Lawrence’s words, movements, and memories in writing.

And no matter how she pruned her words and wrote in detail, it would never

match up against reality. It was hard for someone to recall an apple if they had never seen one before.

But what about a painting?

“Dear, I...”

Holo stared at Lawrence, her lips pursed and eyes swimming.

Though it was unbecoming of his age, Lawrence found himself flustered by the sight of Holo being so emotional, but he had much too much life experience to agree so readily.

Before he started thinking about all the details, he responded as a former merchant.

“Come on—don’t be so absurd.”

“What?!”

Holo seemed like she was going to bite him, but he of course had a response for her.

“Do you know...how much a painting costs?”

They were products for nobles, which was why that merchant was dressed so well.

It was not something a mere bathhouse owner could get his hands on.

“No, but it’s...”

Holo’s eyes were brimming with tears, and she looked off in the direction the priests went. They could see the bell tower of Atiph’s cathedral beyond the dense cluster of buildings.

The painting, likely ordered by people from the Church with the resources they had, was of excellent workmanship. It was like everything that was happening before them had been put down as is on canvas. No matter how hard Holo gripped her quill, it would never compare. That was how much power that image possessed.

And because of that, nobles were keen to leave behind their likenesses in paintings, and the Church had pictures of scenes from the scripture.

“No, no. Anything but that.”

“...”

Holo’s gaze still darted back and forth between the church and Lawrence, but she finally dropped her shoulders in disappointment. She often used her wiles to loosen his purse strings, but she knew how much was inside. She never asked for anything truly outrageous. She must have figured out the sheer cost of paintings from how Lawrence reacted.

In the end, her perked ears and tail deflated beneath her hood and skirt.

If she had simply seen a painting, there was no questioning that she would not have so desperately wanted it. She had seen her share of paintings while traveling, but she had never begged for one before.

But now she had finally come across one that depicted her daughter, who had the exact same face as her, and Col, whom she had known since he was a child. Of course she would want one of herself, too.

“Come on—don’t make that face.”

Lawrence placed his hand on her shoulder, but she did not respond.

He sighed, fished through his coin pouch, and pulled out another silver.

“This can get you plenty of parchment, good food from town, and you can write about your banquet, too.”

Even though her eyes would typically be shining at the opportunity, they remained downcast.

And yet, she was still gripping the silver coin, so it did not seem like she was as dejected as she appeared.

After a moment of thought, Lawrence spoke.

“Or we could take the option of saving up for paint without wasting our money on things we don’t need. Luckily, we have a connection with an artist we met on our old travels.”

“...That pig, no?”

“Mr. Hugues, the sheep.”

Lawrence was making more money than he used to, so the amount that came out of his wallet to please Holo had increased considerably to match. If he saved instead of letting it be squandered away, it would absolutely be a hefty sum.

And even as she whimpered, she was still Holo the Wisewolf. She was likely thinking just that beneath her droopy wolf ears.

In that case, the thing she had to fight against now was her desires.

“...You...take it...,” Holo said, holding out to him the silver she gripped in her hand.

Lawrence was surprised, but it was not because her hand was shaking.

She had been so set on having her fried herring and cool ale, yet she chose frugality.

Holo! Choosing frugality!

Lawrence was touched by how Holo felt, but he had not forgotten his rational, merchantlike decision.

“How about just one for today?”

He took the two silvers from Holo but then gave one back to her.

“A journey of a thousand miles starts with one step. We have to keep this up every day.”

Her freshly fried herring and ale came back to her—she looked up to him with wide eyes.

And then, as though she would never let go, she gripped the silver with both hands and held it to her chest.

Lawrence could not help the smile on his face when he saw her like that, and she glared at him.

“You have always been after a way to get rich quick and constantly run into trouble; I refuse to be laughed at by you!”

“...Yeah, I’m sorry about that.”

“Hmph!”

Holo turned away in a huff, but she did not seem to be that upset. They could forge a path that eventually led to a painting but also eat delicious food. Holo had once said that asceticism did not always bring about good things.

That was because giving up on one thing for something else was not necessarily the correct choice.

“All right, go shopping, then. I’ll get a boat ready for us at the Debau Company. You’re okay with meeting up there, right? Remember you can ask people for directions.”

“I am Holo the Wisewolf. I am not a child.”

“Yeah, sure,” Lawrence responded and then added, “and since you’re not a child, be sure to get my share of herring, too.”

Holo then glared at him from the corner of her eye and said, “And that will be your payment.”

“...But that was my...Fine, I get it.”

When she bared her fangs and growled at him, he pulled back.

“Make sure to pick an ale that’s cold.”

“I know! You fool!”

Holo leaped from the cart with that sharp parting remark and disappeared into the crowd.

“Sheesh, don’t make the name of the wisewolf cry like that.”

Holo was cunning and sometimes even more childish than Myuri.

“Well, I guess that’s why I never get tired of you,” he murmured in self-ridicule, and then he scratched his head. “But a painting...?”

The reason he rejected Holo’s tearful pleas was not because he was being cheap. Paintings really did come with a terrifyingly high price. He flipped through his mental account book, but he still found it difficult to scrape together the funds for it. Commissioning an artisan who would paint aside, procuring the paints and whatnot alone would cost immense amounts of money.

That was why something caught his attention when he heard that those priests had ordered that painting. Perhaps they truly did want to hang up a painting out of their faith, but the monetary power that allowed them to order it so easily and how they did not think twice of doing something else first with that money showed that even though they spoke of reform and correct faith, they were still steeped in the habits of the privileged.

However, it was too late to excuse their lack of worldly sense.

What he needed to be thinking about now was his own financial position.

“If we don’t have it, we just have to get it.”

He needed to obtain a considerable amount of money as efficiently as possible.

Holo had curtly cut him off, but Lawrence still had his pride as a merchant.

Plus, there was a commercial business in this town that he had always wondered about.

Lawrence had the horse proceed at a slow canter to take him to the Debau Company.

The Debau Company was a massive firm whose influence had spread throughout the entire northern region of the mainland. They had branches in each area, and they naturally had a splendid trading house here in Atiph.

Over ten years ago, Lawrence and Holo had had a small hand in the big trouble the Debau Company was involved with, so they had a familiar relationship. Not only that, but one letter from Col and Myuri said that they had stayed at the Debau Company in Atiph, so this visit also served as a way to say thanks for taking care of them.

The manager who ran the trading house of course greeted Lawrence with profuse hospitality, but it felt excessive to him. He could even say that there was a hint of fear behind the manager’s strained smile. And that was also the moment when he mentioned Col’s and Myuri’s names.

Their letters said that while there were ups and downs, their journey was generally going well. Though he wondered if there might be something they

were not telling him, he sort of felt bad about pressing the manager, who was watching Lawrence's every move and showing him the highest degree of respect.

There was that, so he just left it at checking in on a few clerical things before asking to stay in the trading house until their departure.

After being given the best room in the building in an instant, Lawrence put his luggage away and then asked the manager one last question.

Departing based on what he heard, Lawrence made his way to one of the livelier ports in the Atiph harbor town, his destination being a place with the most exciting reputation even within that port.

There were various kinds of shops, companies, and even a line of artisan workshops, but on a corner, there was a building with a metal sign in the shape of a herring. At a glance, it looked like a tavern that specialized in seafood, but it was not.

The moment Lawrence opened the door, the loud voices and heat practically slapped him in the face.

"Ooooh! Look! The Gabon Company sure claimed a ton!"

"Anyone, anyone?! Anyone claiming anything?!"

"What, did the Gabon Company catch something?!"

"Nah, it's still before the harvest festival; no way I'll know what the sea'll be like next spring. How should I know what the fish in the whimsical southern seas are supposed to be like?!"

"Tips, anyone for tips?! Who wants some tips straight from the northern sea?!"

The stiflingly hot air was coming from the excitement of the people packed in there, the strong-looking alcohol in their hands, and the mountains of fried fish. And for some reason, smoked herring hung from the ceiling, making the air even more potent than it needed to be.

It seemed like a gathering place for gamblers, yet everyone there was dressed in fine clothes.

But the refinement of an art dealer who would offer a painting to the Church was nowhere to be seen; they were money mad, those who would start scraping off the edges of their silver if they had a free moment.

“Well, you’re not a face we see around here,” a voice called out to him as he stood still in the doorway. The man had quills stuck behind both of his ears, and he had a thick accounts book in his hand. It was filled with numbers and abbreviations of names. “If you thought this place was a tavern, then go home.”

The wharves were a gathering place for the rough sort, and everyone was quick to start a fight.

Despite how overwhelmed Lawrence was, he quickly pulled himself together.

“The Debau Company lent me participation rights.”

“Hmm?”

The bearded man, his alcohol-flushed face shining with grease, grabbed the parchment that Lawrence produced.

Then, once he scanned it, he forced his coarseness back with a somehow awed smile.

“A’riiight, starting today, you’re one of our crew. But I can’t guarantee if you’ll be heading to heaven or hell!”

The man roared with laughter and smacked Lawrence’s shoulders painfully, then took one of the quills from behind his ear.

“And you came at a good time! This year’s trade only started a few days ago, so there’s no telling where you’ll be headed. It’s the most interesting time of the year! So what’ll it be? The price list’s over there!”

There was a massive board on the wall that stretched from floor to ceiling, and written on it were countless numbers and rather adorable drawings of fish. Errand boys clung to the ladder that leaned beside the board, busily changing the numbers. This was a sight that could be seen sometimes at auctions in markets, though this was a different kind.

But even Lawrence, who had pride as an ex-merchant that he had traveled the world and dealt with almost every kind of good, had only ever heard of the

merchandise handled here in rumors.

“Come and claim, come and claim! Smile for spring or cry for spring! It’s all the will of our mother, the sea!”

That provocative line only made the air in there hotter.

The place that Lawrence visited was not an exchange for herring but an exchange for herring eggs.

Herring could be caught in large quantities. Huge, massive bunches of them. They had to be widely available in order for them to be cheap even in the deepest mountain ranges.

Even though everyone has tasted the fish at least once, there was a part of it that many had actually never tasted.

And that was their eggs.

“Last year was a bad catch, the year before last was a good catch, and the year before that was also a good catch, and before that for five years were all fantastic catches. So that means this year will, at worst, be a good catch, and depending, it might even be an unprecedented fantastic catch.”

“You idiot, good and bad catches for herring mean nothing. It just depends on how many eggs are in the herring’s stomachs in the end, right? The herring are meatier and have fantastic builds this year in that respect. They’ll probably be so filled with eggs by the time winter ends, they’ll be bursting with ’em!”

“Hey, are you a kid who’s just trading for the first time? This is a trade that exists because there are buyers and sellers. We could talk about herring all day, but we won’t know how much they’ll cost without the crucial buyers. The key is in the sardines, as they say.”

“You saying you’ve got info on the south?”

“Heh-heh-heh, and what if I do?”

“Damn it, he knows something!”

Conversations like that ceaselessly continued at every table. They spoke about information on herring, rumors about the south, and especially the summer weather and the harvest of something called sardines.

People did not eat herring eggs; they were instead used as bait for sardine fishing. And since sardines had a much bigger difference in good and bad catches than herring did, the value of the ground bait that were the herring eggs fluctuated violently from one extreme to the other.

Merchants were like cats—their attention was immediately grabbed by merchandise whose price varied a lot, and they were planning on jumping after them.

“Man, if I were a fish, I’d swim right down to the southern seas and directly ask the sardines how things are looking!”

When one merchant yelled that, everyone else there burst out in laughter.

All the merchants here came from various faraway regions to Atiph to bet on the price of the herring eggs that would be harvested the following spring. Most were wealthy merchants, and from Lawrence’s perspective, they were casually placing dizzying amounts of money on the line.

Wheat also had violent fluctuations in price, but gambling on its futures was outlawed in every town because it was a necessity in daily life. If handled poorly, one might be seen as a monopolist and possibly sent to the guillotine.

In that respect, since it was the sardines that ate herring eggs, the sardines would not get angry, no matter how much one bought.

And since they were not gambling with dice and cards, the Church let the practice slide.

It was called one of the very few trades that God ordered for the merchants.

And so there were plenty of merchants gathered here, and it was said that it was thanks to this trade of herring eggs that Atiph could develop far away from other port cities. When wealthy merchants came together, they dropped a considerable amount of money into the town, and when they did that, various trades were brought to life and even more people came to gather.

Lawrence came to this exchange, which almost had the atmosphere of a festival inside, not only to observe but also to bet.

“Then I will be buying. I’m a little embarrassed placing a bid at such a low

price, though.”

“Heh, aw, don’t be. Even the men over there with stacks of *lumione* on their table all started out with a single silver, too. Some of ’em lost everything, down to the clothes on their back, but saved up seed money harvesting the eggs from the herrings’ stomachs like they were clearing their grudges, and then they came back ready to go again. May God protect you!”

The man took the silver from Lawrence and wrote the number down in his account book; he truly seemed to be enjoying himself.

“But you really wanna buy?”

He asked that after he wrote down Lawrence’s purchase order.

“I hear it was clear all year on the southern seas. When it’s sunny like that, the catch of sardines the following season is usually bad.”

He egged on Lawrence’s fears like that either to extract a cancel fee from him or to collect information from him.

Either way, Lawrence was not inexperienced enough to fall for it.

“God came to me in a vision.”

The man’s mouth warped into a grin.

“Well, I take orders all the time. The day of thanks in the spring is the last day of trade. But no one keeps taking orders for that long.”

From what Lawrence heard at the Debau Company, most of the merchants here had nothing to do with the herring eggs themselves. They only speculated on the fluctuating prices, and most of them apparently closed out on their bets partway through. On the last day of this great commotion, the merchants who actually processed, transported, and sold the herring eggs to the fishermen and companies in the south would come, taking the eggs according to the orders from the south.

It was an odd trade, but thanks to this exchange here, the herring fishermen could sell the eggs they had not harvested yet and receive the payment up front. Because of that, even if it became clear afterward that there was a terrible catch of sardines in the south and the price of their feed, the herring

eggs, plummeted, the fishermen would have already received payment, so they could have some peace of mind. Conversely, if the price of eggs shot up, most of them might find that vexing, but they would all rather choose security.

And the merchants, who saw things the other way around and loved foolhardy bets, put their fates in the hands of the herring eggs from autumn to spring, until they discovered what the real demand for the eggs was.

“May God protect your partners on your new ship, too,” the man said, smacking Lawrence on the shoulder, then shuffled off after being called over by another merchant.

The values on the board continued to change in the meanwhile. There were still no eggs in the herrings’ stomachs, and there were still not even any sardines that would eat those gathered eggs. They were all trading in imaginary herring eggs here.

The merchants’ world was a strange one, one that almost made Lawrence forget he ran a bathhouse in the mountains of Nyohhira.

He deeply inhaled the air of the place and found himself smiling in delight.

But he had not come simply to relive his memories, nor had he come to make bets at random. He had a chance of success.

Plenty of guests from the south came to the bathhouses in Nyohhira, so even though he was the bathhouse master of an establishment in the remote northern mountains, he was not entirely ignorant of word of the southern seas. He had heard from his southern guests that the catch of sardines depended on the rains that visited the rivers upstream in the summer.

Lawrence had a heartening ally as well. The one whom he worshipped, praised the tail of, and offered alcohol and delicious food to every day was none other than Holo, one who could control the harvests and bad crops of wheat, one who had even been regarded as a god. He had once asked her about the relationship between sardines and the rain when she dozed during a nap.

He then learned that the rain washed the nutrients down from the mountain, ultimately dissolving into the river, where they helped the river fish grow fat. The situation was the same for the sea, where the river emptied into, so it

would not be wrong to see it as the rains upstream eventually becoming a good catch for fish in the sea.

And he heard that it had been quite rainy upstream this summer. As a result, the price of wheat rose because of a bad harvest, and he knew that other foodstuffs would follow suit and also go up in price. For that, there was no questioning that once sardine fishing started, sardines would fetch a high price, and the bait used in that fishing would also go up.

Anyway, when he put all that information together, he saw victory.

Not only that, but unlike so-called gambling, no matter how far off the estimates he was, he would still at least get some herring eggs in this bet. Like the exchange of arms long ago, it was impossible that he would lose anything over his standing, and as long as herring eggs never started going for free, he would not lose everything.

It was a perfect calculation.

“I can still do things as a merchant. And it’ll go toward her painting—two birds with one stone.”

Lawrence sang his own praises, but he of course chose to gamble very carefully. He did not bet all his assets like he would have done a long time ago, and he modestly spent only a few silver *trenni*.

If he added this bet to the meager pile of methods he might use to make money in the future, then they could probably commission a small painting.

Holo would surely be happy.

“It might all be for her, but I still have to keep a trade like this secret. Who knows what she’ll say.”

Holo often seemed easygoing, but she was surprisingly dependable.

Lawrence left the exchange and sniffed his own clothes. There was no way Holo would not notice the smell of alcohol and fried food on him, and she would certainly ask where he went.

On the way back to the Debau Company, he stood in the smoke of stands grilling beef as long as he could, and he bought skewered garlic and a

hodgepodge of fish for her as a souvenir.

On the first day of their stay, the Debau Company gave them a hardy welcome, and they stayed up rather late.

But the boat wouldn't be full and ready to leave for at least the next ten days, so there was naturally no need to feel hurried. They had been camping outside until then, so it was the perfect chance for them to rest their tired bodies.

The following day, Lawrence awoke with the rising sun as was his habit, but of course, instead of getting straight up, he went back to sleep. He was so comfortable, he understood very well why Holo always grumbled when it came to waking up. He lent himself to the comfort of falling back to sleep as he thought about that and finally woke up for good when the sun was already high in the sky.

He knew he needed to get up soon, and he searched for fur within the blanket as he always did. They had borrowed some hot water from the company yesterday to have a thorough cleaning, so Holo's tail was as fluffy as it had ever been.

Cuddling a warm Holo, tail and all, was the best thing for an idle morning nap...but as his hand fished around, he finally opened his eyes.

"...Holo?"

Holo, who typically would sleep forever if he let her, was not there. He looked to the back of the chair by the bed and saw that only Lawrence's coat hung off it—Holo's robe was gone.

He had thought she would be sleeping in until noon that day, considering how much they drank last night, so he wondered where she went.

"...Maybe she'll be back soon..."

Lawrence murmured to himself and yawned. Without Holo around, he found himself bored in his first moments of consciousness. He rolled over and closed his eyes.

But once he knew that Holo was gone, it seemed like the inside of the blanket went cold, and the room was too quiet. Once he finally sneezed, Lawrence

curled up in a sulk.

It was almost like he could not fall asleep on his own out of loneliness.

Regrettably, even though he squeezed his eyes shut, determined to fall back to sleep for a third time, drowsiness never came. The silence rang in his ears, and he felt uneasy.

“...”

No need to be stubborn; I guess I'll go look for her.

As he thought that to himself, just as he was about to get up, the door opened.

“What, you are still asleep?”

That was the first thing Holo said when he turned to face the door and their eyes met.

Lawrence only ever slept in during the very few times that there was nothing happening at the bathhouse, and he was usually the one to wake Holo. Even on this trip, he got up first when they were camping and busied himself with preparing breakfast and starting the fire.

He had been disappointed at finding himself alone in bed, but Holo did not seem to mind a bit. She reached out to the cask placed by the window, poured the remaining wine from last night into a cup, and immediately drank it down in a single gulp.

“Burp.”

He was exasperated at how much energy she had despite getting up early in the morning. Holo wiped her mouth with her sleeve, then energetically whirled around.

“Come now—you mustn't sleep all day. We must get ready to go!”

Still under the blanket, Lawrence furrowed his brow quizzically.

“Go...? Go where?”

“To town, of course! I have collected word of noteworthy places,” Holo said, and Lawrence finally noticed the crumpled piece of paper in her hand. “You

agreed last night, too.”

“Last night...? Wh...?”

Lawrence slowly got up and tried to remember with his vague memory.

After they had filled themselves with seafood, they drank the sweet mead they still had plenty of as Holo and her freshly washed tail sat on his lap. They were relaxed knowing they could fall straight asleep, unlike when it came to camping outside, so they ended up drinking a lot. The mead was eventually not enough, and he remembered popping open spirits.

After that, he did not remember anything.

Luckily, he was not hungover, but Holo stood by the bed, arms folded and glowering down at him like she was angry with her habitually drunk husband.

Lawrence shrugged and Holo sighed, pulled the coat off the chair back, and tossed it to him.

He slowly removed the garment from his head, and Holo said, “We have time until the ship leaves, no?”

“Hmm? Yeah, it sounds like they have a lot to pack...They’re busy exchanging the wheat from the south’s summer harvest and the furs from the north. Um... and? We could probably see all the sights in town in a day, and I asked the Debau Company to order writing implements for you...”

But Holo gripped some sort of paper in her hand. It seemed the lazy Holo had gotten up early and gone to gather information.

Lawrence swallowed a yawn and looked up to his sometimes-outrageous traveling partner.

“So what are we doing?”

Holo sniffed, then sighed, and then stuck the paper out into Lawrence’s face.

“I shall be working myself to the bone!”

I think you’re still drunk from last night, Lawrence thought.

Once they entered the lively town of Atiph, Holo eagerly peered at the piece of paper in her hand as Lawrence yawned beside her. The note had various

things in Holo's usual bad handwriting written on it, and it seemed to be generally the types of work found in towns.

Holo was a proud wolf, but it was exceedingly uncertain to say if she was diligent or not. It would take rather a whole lot for her to work during a trip without sightseeing or wandering around and eating the local specialties.

When he asked, the day before really did seem to be the cause of it.

"I whined like a child about wanting the picture, but you cannot create something from nothing. And your wallet is meant for buying me food and drink at the end of the day."

"I'm really happy that you noticed the truth. I wish you'd known that when I was traveling around as a merchant, though."

"Fool. And I asked about the price of a painting, and, well...I do understand why you would refuse on the spot."

Holo was, all in all, sharp and clever, so she had a better grasp on the market values of things than any random girl wandering about town.

"But if we just have something done with charcoal and cloth, then we could still have someone draw us with pen and water in just a few days."

"..."

Holo glared at Lawrence when he said that.

"Why does that little fool Myuri get something so wonderful, while my face must be dirtied with charcoal?"

The Great Wisewolf was hundreds of years old.

But Lawrence knew Holo very well.

Beneath her massive wolf fangs was a maiden more ladylike than her daughter, Myuri.

"Of course. You're just as cute as Myuri is, but you would shine much brighter in a painting for all the dignity that you have."

He would not dare breathe a syllable of calling her childish, so that was what he said. Of course, there was no mistruth to it, either, so Holo, whose ears could

detect lies, was delighted.

“It seems you’ve finally understood.”

“Yes, finally,” he responded theatrically, and Holo burst out into laughter, unable to hold it back, and Lawrence laughed as well. “So are you planning on earning some money somewhere? It’s a lively town, so I don’t think you’ll be too hard-pressed to find some temporary work...What are these symbols here?”

“Mm, ’tis work I believe would suit me.”

Work suitable for Holo the Wisewolf.

Lawrence quietly repeated that phrase to himself as Holo showed him her notes, but ignoring her as she beamed with pride, he found himself making a rather dry smile.

“Bakery salesgirl, tavern salesgirl, sausage salesgirl...These are all food-related.”

“Good, no?”

He would refrain from asking how it was *good*.

She likely assumed she could snack her way through work.

Despite that thought in his head, Lawrence said, “I’m sure the shop owners would be happy to hire you as a poster girl for their shop.”

“Indeed!”

She was charismatic and had a nice smile, so if she stood out in front of a store wearing a headkerchief and an apron, a line would form in no time.

There was no question about that at all, but Lawrence knew one thing that Holo did not. Well, perhaps it would be more apt to say that there was something, thinking back on their past trade journey together, that she had forgotten.

Yet, if he said it out loud, Holo would likely not acknowledge it.

There were plenty of things in the world that one had to experience to learn.

“Well, good luck,” Lawrence said and returned the paper to Holo. “Your drunk

and useless husband is going to go laze about in his room.”

Holo flashed a gallant smile and laughed.

Holo was hired on the spot as a salesgirl for a bakery. Not only was this a busy season for travelers, but boats were coming into harbor one after the other, so customers who were fed up with hardtack came in droves to the shop to get their fresh bread. They greeted her briefly before telling her to stand outside right away.

After waving to Holo as she excitedly put on her apron, Lawrence left the shop.

He wandered around the port afterward, looking into the price and quality of the goods that came to Atiph, and paid a visit to the companies he always ordered from. He then went around to visit a few companies that dealt with flours in town. They had run into trouble ordering wheat before, and there might be something cheaper than the barley from the production center they always bought from. The barley farms were always going in and out of fashion.

And he found himself getting excited just by looking at the shops in a lively town.

Running a bathhouse was by no means boring, but it was a different sort of enjoyment from thinking about how to order an unbelievable number of products and where he might sell them to get the highest price.

He ate lunch outside at some food stands, then, feeling like he was a rookie again, he went around to look minutely at the business transactions in Atiph. He decided to peek in at the herring egg exchange while he was at it, and he chuckled to himself when he saw the price of eggs was going up.

Time passed in a flash as he wandered around doing this and that, and the loud ringing of the church bell brought him back to reality. It signaled the end of a day and was also the bell to close up shop for most places. Holo would be finishing work soon.

Thinking she would have been standing and talking all day for work, Lawrence bought what he was told was freshly made apple cider, then returned to the Debau Company. The maids let him know that Holo had already returned.

Lawrence opened the door to the room and gave a tired smile.

“Good work today.”

Holo had scattered her thick clothing and lay facedown on the bed, wearing only her chilly, casual clothes.

She did not even budge an inch, and the lay of fur on her tail that she was so proud of was mussed.

The room was filled with the scent of fresh bread, and the source of the smell was likely Holo.

If he hugged her as she was now, she would doubtlessly smell incredibly good.

“What do you want to do for dinner?” he asked, but she did not move. He thought about how she did not seem to be asleep as he placed the small cask of cider on the table. There was a bag there. He loosened the strings to open it and found some bread that she had brought home, likely a gift from the shop owner. It all looked delicious, but it did not seem like any of the loaves had been touched. The gluttonous Holo would never have considered something so laudable as waiting until her dearest husband had returned home before eating.

With a knowing smile, Lawrence said, “It’s only the first few minutes that it smells good, isn’t it?”

She probably figured that if she was to work at all, she might as well spend her hours be surrounded by good smells...But there was such a thing as too much of a good thing.

“You...knew...”

He heard her parched voice coming from the bed, one that made his own throat hurt just listening to it.

“Sure, but you wouldn’t believe me if I told you.”

“...”

Her messy tail stood and then lifelessly drooped.

“I can’t remember when, but you went to go sell meat and bread to a water

mill construction site, remember? Did you forget that it was only at the very beginning that you were happily snacking on the product?"

"~~~..."

Holo said something with her face still pushed into the pillow, kicked her feet, and then held them straight out. That meant *Shut up and massage my feet*.

"Now you see how hard it is to make money."

He sat down on the bed, and Holo kicked him with her bare feet. There was lukewarm water and a washcloth in a washtub next to the bed, so he soaked the cloth in the water, squeezed it out, and then wiped her feet. They were small and shapely.

The maids had likely been very considerate by putting hot water into the washtub, but Holo was in no mood to bother with it after using up all her energy; she had used the last of it removing her clothes before lying facedown on the bed.

"But it was a good event to remember, wasn't it?" Lawrence said with a smile, and her left foot, which he was not washing, kicked him in the shoulder.

"Are you going tomorrow?"

The moment he asked, her right foot shuddered in his hand.

When he looked up to her face, she had lifted her head and spoke painfully. "...The name of the wisewolf would be shamed should I run away after one day..."

Shops hired travelers temporarily on a day or half-day basis, so they typically would not mind, but Holo was a proud one.

"Well, tomorrow you can work hard, and then we can just say that a different shop called on you."

Holo closed her eyes and sighed deeply, then slowly sat up and clung to Lawrence.

"I can't wipe your feet like this."

Even though he still had her left foot to go, Holo continued clinging to him,

unmoving, like a small child.

Despite how she could easily breeze her way through the world on her own, she was in this state after just one day of working at a bakery.

Lawrence found himself smiling, but he was also happy when he thought about how she was showing him her vulnerable side like this.

“You should take a little rest. The lights are on all night at the port this time of year, so we can do some sightseeing as we go eat.”

He patted Holo’s head, and her triangular wolf ears flicked about. When she did, wheat flew off them, like scales falling from a butterfly, and he could tell how rough her work was.

“Well then, I’m going to talk a bit with the manager here about my wo—”

Just as he was about to stand, he was pulled back into the bed. Holo did not even move to lift her head from his chest. She had surely lavishly spent an entire year’s worth of amiability at the bakery.

Holo was shy; she was trying to replenish herself after being eroded down by customer service.

Lawrence made a tired yet kind smile, embraced her in return, and her tail began to lightly thump against the bed.

Someone always needed the happiness of a merchant.

And before long, he could hear her snoring softly.

In the end, Holo worked for three days at the bakery out of pride and did not quite earn a silver *trenni* but made about half of one. She was paid in small change, which also helped. Her payment was overboard considering the market prices, either because she worked really hard or because the bakery was very successful.

In exchange, Lawrence was busy filling in all the parts of Holo she had worked to dust.

He brushed her hair after getting up in the morning, dressed her, ripped off pieces of bread to feed her, patted her on the head when she got down, complimented her tail—he almost wanted some sort of salary for himself, but

he did not mind such days every once in a while.

After it was all said and done, Holo spent almost two full days in depravity after finishing work at the bakery before she finally got her energy back.

“Honestly, what a terrible thing I have been through!” Holo said as she ripped into the sausage she was eating for lunch in the room they were staying in.

She spoke as though it was Lawrence who had forced her into working, but it would only drag on if he pointed that out to her, so he stayed silent.

“But I could not even manage a shiny silver for myself; how dreadfully long it must take...”

“There’s no rush in making money. There’s still so much work here.”

The paper Holo had filled with notes about work she had heard about around town was packed with jobs meant for travelers who were waiting for favorable winds for their boat or for their stagecoach, or the kind that suddenly needed more helping hands.

Unloading cargo at the port was a standard job, and there was also work for people to chase the herds of pigs and sheep once they were unloaded. There was also demand for boat cleaners, as well as seamstresses to repair the sails—all very typical of a port town.

There were also plenty of salesgirls, and those who could read and write would undoubtedly find work at the notary association.

“I have had enough of the food sort,” Holo said, sprinkling a generous helping of mustard onto her sausage before biting into it.

Her shoulders immediately tensed at the spice, and the hairs on her tail stood on end.

“Then what’s left is technical work or heavy labor.”

“Ooooh...Is there nothing else? Something easy and simple. Wine tasting or something of the sort.”

Despite how she had just gotten a taste of the pain of being surrounded by too much food, she had not learned her lesson.

“You’d be a huge help if there was work meant for sniffing out mixed flour.”

That very thing had happened in the bathhouse once, and Holo and Myuri realized they had gotten mixed flour thanks to their wolf noses.

“You fool. Should I do a job like that, I would not be able to smell for ten days afterward.”

But then you wouldn’t realize you were eating cheap food, and that’d be a big help..., Lawrence murmured silently to himself as his eyes stopped on a line in the list of jobs she had collected.

“What is this?”

“Mm?”

Traveling merchants went to many different lands and conducted business in each place according to circumstances. That was why he had considerable confidence when it came to knowledge about the world, but there was something there that Lawrence did not know.

“Mixing girl?”

“Ah yes, that one.” Holo stuffed her mouth with bread filled with walnuts and clapped her hands. “I heard about it from a girl who was sewing all day in this trading house. There is some sort of job like that in the harbor.”

“Do you mix things, like the name says? What do you mix?”

“I hear the most common is wheat. Aye. Sounds quite suited for me.”

That did not ring any bells.

“Do you help a baker, then?” Lawrence asked, and Holo swallowed her wine to finish off her meal, then exhaled in bliss.

“I have already said I will no longer do such a thing, no? This work is caring for the wheat before it is made into flour. You only deal with wheat by placing it on your nice, breezy cart, which is why you do not know.” Holo wiped her mouth, energetically reached for a certain coat pocket, and grabbed Lawrence’s share of food as well. “You know wheat goes bad quickly in the damp, yes? ’Tis also true in the village. So when it is being stored, it must be mixed twice a day to air it out. Ones that might seem especially damp are left to dry outside.”

“Huh, I didn’t know that. I do wonder about the quality sometimes, but I never wondered how they kept it.”

“Hmph.” Holo crossed her arms and for some reason looked at him with a reproachful stare. “Honestly, you always act like that.”

Holo’s fluffy tail deliberately swayed back and forth behind her. The thick fur never failed to keep him warm at night.

“...Don’t you always write down how much I support and nurture your tail?”

That was even doubly true for the main body it was attached to. Had she already forgotten how he treated her yesterday and the day before?

“You fool, ’tis not enough.”

When she said that, Lawrence could only shrug with a sigh.

“Anyway. I am practiced at caring for wheat, and the markets in both the village and the town have decided that ’tis a woman’s job.”

“So that’s why it’s called a ‘mixing girl.’”

Every job had its own responsibilities and its own territory. Even in towns that Lawrence thought he knew everything about, there were still some things that a man would never notice.

“I have heard that there are also songs to sing when mixing. Sounds delightful.”

She did not often join in on the festivities in the bathhouse, but Holo did sometimes sing and dance.

When he imagined her sticking her arm in a sack stuffed with wheat, humming cheerfully as she did so, Lawrence found it endearing.

“Don’t let your guard down and start wagging your tail.”

“I am not a dog!”

As Holo glared at him, their hands intertwined, they made their way down to the port.

After inquiring from people on the street at the port, they headed to a district lined with warehouses where they would most likely find the work in question,

and sure enough, among the many cargo handlers and merchants, there were a few women here and there. Lawrence had also noticed that there were women about when he visited the harbor, of course, but it never crossed his mind what sort of work they might be doing.

Being a mixing girl apparently required wearing short sleeves, even in the middle of winter, so when he saw that all the women were wearing short sleeves, he only felt embarrassed at how clueless he was.

“Ah, will you be working, miss?”

After asking people passing by on the street, they met a little old man, gripping a pen, who supervised the mixing girl work at the notary office by the warehouses.

He seemed like a regular kind old man at first, but they could see countless scars on his skin, which had been terribly weathered by the sun, and the bones in his fingers were unusually fat. He was likely well-known as a cargo handler and had shouldered the processing of goods when he was younger.

“We’re always in need of more people this time of year. Have you handled wheat before, miss?”

“Should you ask me to produce buds on any stalk of wheat, I would be able to do so straightaway, given that it is not cooked.”

Holo the Wisewolf, who resided in wheat and controlled its harvest, really could do that, but the old man of reception of course only smiled.

“How promising. Then I’ll have you start work right away. Oh, but roll up your sleeves, please. That is your uniform for this work. All the other short-sleeved girls will come to your aid if they see you wrapped up in trouble with any of the cargo handlers.”

“Aye.”

As Lawrence watched Holo gleefully roll up her sleeves, he felt the old man’s gaze on him.

“And are you here to help with the cargo, sir? You seem like you can read and write, so maybe transcribing work. We have plenty of both.”

Lawrence was flustered, having the conversation suddenly turn to him.

“Er, I...”

He also had plenty of work to do. He had to sell the sulfur powder that he had accepted in Nyohhira, and he had to obtain the small change that they lacked.

“Hmm? Oh, pardon me, you’re not married, are you?”

“Uh, well—”

Just as Lawrence was about to answer, Holo butted in.

“This fool spends his days drunk in the room whilst making only me work.”

“Hey!”

He had been writing letters and such to different companies, so he definitely was not just lazing about. He was sipping on mead as he worked, however, so he was afraid of the consequences if he said anything strongly in retort.

“Oh-ho. Well, everyone has their tastes, so I won’t blame you for falling for a layabout, but it will be hard work for you.”

“Aye. I am well aware.”

When Holo and the old man with his missing tooth smiled at each other, Lawrence could do nothing but sigh.

“Well, most of the mixing girls are like that. That goes without saying, though.”

“Well, what can I say. The more of a handful they are, the more fun it is.”

The old man made a vexed smile and then called on the next girl in line behind them.

“And so I shall work admirably.”

“Sure.”

Lawrence responded with a sigh, and Holo gave a delightfully bright smile.

Working as a mixing girl seemed to suit Holo’s personality well. Plenty of different kinds of wheat came from all over to the port, and just looking at it was enjoyable enough for her, so it was even more so when she was mixing and

learning new things. Wheat husks stuck to her fluffy tail, Holo cheerfully wrote about her work as she spoke to Lawrence right up until she fell asleep.

Then, on the night of the second day, she also started to talk about the other mixing girls she worked with. There was, of all people, a traveling dancer who had also worked in Nyohhira, and they were surprised to see each other. There still were no guests in Nyohhira at this time of year, so she was earning a little pocket change in the meanwhile.

Of course, most of the women who worked as mixing girls were locals, and most of them were either poor or widows. Though it was a given, one could not make a whole lot of money mixing wheat.

Men could not take on this job in order to guarantee work for women who had nowhere else to make money, and it was also so the women did not end up on the wrong path and in ruin.

That being said, just as the old man at reception had mentioned, Holo said there were plenty who had ended up as mixing girls after finding themselves in ruin. Their romantic partners were good-for-nothings who had everything taken away from them by either alcohol or gambling.

“‘Tis much like me.” Holo had pretended to cry and then flapped her tail about happily. She was in the best mood whenever she got to tease Lawrence like that.

It was the third day, when he saw her off as she energetically made her way to work at the port.

Holo’s joke wasn’t entirely wrong, Lawrence thought to himself at the herring egg exchange.

“What is the meaning of this? They’re closing the exchange?!”

Merchants yelled and the building shook. It was only times like this that he was not given any food or drink and simply stared hard at the board showing the prices of herring eggs.

Lawrence had come to the exchange because just after he had written a letter to a friendly company in the room, a member of the Debau Company came to give him the news.

He had been told that there was a problem with the herring egg exchange.

He rushed over after hearing that and found the whole place in confusion with talk over the exchange closing and everyone bellowing in rage at one another.

“God forbids fortune-telling. And gambling is nothing more than fortune-telling.”

Standing there in the exchange, where great sums of money and greed flew back and forth, were several people who seemed completely out of place.

They were priests, clad in clerical robes.

“What’s happening here is the exchange of herring eggs—not gambling!”

Someone yelled and a whole group of merchants surrounded the priests and glowered at them. Yet—no, *because* of that, the five or so priests did not recoil, keeping their dignified stances, and then spoke.

“How peculiar. You are conducting trade over herring eggs that do not yet exist here. That is no different from reading omens of the future.”

The one who spoke with clear-cut logic was a young man who seemed to be the very picture of seriousness.

Judging by his clothes, he seemed to be a head pastor. His position was rather high for how old he looked, so he was either extremely talented or a young person given a step up into the world by the Church to match the impending reforms.

The ones around him, supporting him, were middle-aged priests.

“I have also heard that one of you here has never taken part in an actual deal with herring eggs—is that correct?”

When he said that, Lawrence could feel the merchants swallowing their words regretfully.

No one in this building had ever seen herring eggs before. They had no interest in the real goods and had come from so far away only because the price fluctuated so violently, making it the perfect article to speculate on.

They must have thought somewhere in those heads of theirs that they were doing something strange, so they understood that it looked even weirder from the outside.

“But this system is so old and important because it supports the lives of the fishermen who live in the northern islands!” a clever one yelled, and everyone around him agreed.

“And it’s normal for merchants to buy and sell products that don’t exist yet! We always forward-buy wheat, grapes, and other fruit! If you’re going to criticize us for never touching herring eggs in real life, then what do you think of mines?! Merchants who pay for zoning for mines will never actually pick up a pickaxe and go there themselves! Why do only we deserve to be called gamblers?!”

A piercing applause rippled through the room.

Despite the mass of enraged merchants who surrounded them, the expressions on the priests’ faces did not budge an inch. There was a rigidity that showed so much adherence to faith that just looking at them was refreshing.

“It is a question of fairness.”

The young man’s quiet voice had a strange force that made all the merchants recoil.

His manner reminded Lawrence so much of Col, who had debated with theologians so many times in the Nyohhira bathhouse.

“Some among you will earn an enormous fortune here in this exchange. But all those who catch the herring, process it, and transport it will never gain a matching amount of money without ever shedding a single drop of sweat. Then I cannot say anything but that there is something wrong with what is happening here.”

Many of the merchants widened their eyes, spurred on by the impulse to jeer, but pulled their lips tightly shut, their faces red and their blue veins bulging from their temples.

Lawrence understood this logically.

The herring egg exchange was simply nothing more than gambling for the rich.

As the merchants and the priests continued their silent staring contest, a calm voice interjected.

“But it serves its uses to the town.”

It was a skinny merchant with a beard that was half-white and half-black.

He seemed to be upper-middle class, but his demeanor exuded a calm that had a strange power to it.

“Because of the herring egg exchange, many merchants gather here in town, stay here, and pay whatever it takes to stay. And because of the herring egg exchange happening here, the fishermen of the north prioritize distributing their herring. If the herring egg exchange moved elsewhere, all the work surrounding herring would move there. They say that the very town of Atiph itself was an operation of herring egg exchanges at its foundation. This tradition supports the town.”

Someone yelled, “Exactly!” and then came the cries of agreement and the eruption of applause.

Even if they had come to right the wrongs of this place, they worked for the church in Atiph, maintaining buildings with the townspeople’s donations, making furniture, and hiring people. And in every town, either openly or secretly, the Church had a hand in trade. There was no way that a priest could harm the energy of a town. It was because of that cunningness that the Church had branches all over the world, more than any massive firm.

The merchant who spoke calmly, as well as the others who heard him speak, were sure of that fact. Along that train of thought, perhaps the priests were going to stir things up by presenting the rules and principles of faith and then trying to take taxes or something from the exchange.

When Lawrence heard nearby merchants whispering about that, he thought that was obvious.

He had always been astonished by the priests’ business sense when he had been a traveling merchant.

He thought it would be the same thing this time, but the priest said something unbelievable.

“In order to conform with the spirit of God, we at the ecclesiastical chapter have decided to close this exchange to keep the town from becoming a bed of vice.”

The whole room fell quiet, like water had been dumped on it, and nobody bellowed in anger this time.

“We have recognized everything happening in this exchange as corrupt fortune-telling and gambling and moneylending that is considered sacrilegious under God.”

The merchants' mouths hung open.

Were these priests for real? Were they really planning on unrooting this money tree and tossing it from the town? The *Church*, who was already dirtied with money? What for?

As everyone expressed their voiceless confusion, the previous merchant opened his mouth. Even his voice had gotten stiffer, perhaps because of the shock.

“...Many in town will oppose the closing of the herring egg exchange. Do you understand how much in earnings the town will lose because of this?”

The young priest, his expression so serious that it was almost terrifying, spat, “The majority of the townsfolk are not the kind to gamble gold and silver with a straight face like you. They sweat, work reliably, and earn their coppers. This town is being supported by their honest labor. And many of the townsfolk see you as corrupt merchants.”

The merchants got the message that he was being serious.

No one spoke, so the young priest continued.

“And is there anything more important in this world than correct faith?”

To think a place so steeped in greed as this would end up having to hear a sermon.

The merchants did not bother hiding their looks of disgust.

But no one openly opposed the priest.

That was because they were merchants, and they were especially sensitive to the trends of the times.

“This town had also forgotten God’s teachings until not too long ago. But we have taken back the correct faith. We will repent. God will forgive even your sins.”

The trend of society was the Church and the reform of faith.

The townsfolk also agreed with that. That was why the feasts were all shut down.

But even if this place was closed, a place to exchange herring eggs was still absolutely necessary. It would be a hassle to move it, but it did not mean they would no longer be able to trade forever.

When the young priest saw the merchants flip the switches in their heads and start thinking about the next thing, he spoke.

“Therefore, in accordance with God’s teachings, the ecclesiastical chapter has decided to confiscate all the dirty money that has been gambled with from this nest of vice.”

“What?!”

Everyone looked up, and there were a handful who stood from their chairs.

No matter what they were told, even if their gambling place was shut down, there was one thing that merchants, even the ones who were well-behaved when their scales were balanced, would not tolerate.

And that was the forceful seizure of their gold and silver.

That was the only thing they would never stand for. That was the one territory where no one should tread.

Here, especially, there were many who put great sums of money on the line. They were placing their fates on money that was greater than the sum of their parts.

It was when the atmosphere was fully charged and in danger of erupting that

something astonishing happened.

“But God always forgives you. If you are to repent at the church, then you will be granted a pardon for your sins as well as the return of your purified money.”

It was an old trick of the Church to offer a chance to repent after announcing a severe punishment. By flashing goodwill after a hefty price, they bought favors from others. They said they would return the money they took, yet there was no doubt that they would take part as prayer charges or something of the sort. But still, it was absolutely better than losing everything.

He could almost hear the sounds of the abaci clicking in all the merchants' heads.

“The townspeople see your corrupt gambling as an act of turning away from God. Do you still plan on continuing your trade, even when the townsfolk of such a faithful village look at you with such contempt?”

Now, as the search for correct faith was gaining momentum, merchants who used lavish amounts of money in fishy gambling such as this herring egg exchange had awful reputations.

The Church listened to the people's reports and saw this as a good opportunity.

They could penalize the merchants, and they could also show the townsfolk how they worked.

It seemed like the outcome was already decided.

“...When will you give our money back?” someone asked.

The young priest gave a kind smile, one he would show in morning prayer.

It was, somehow, reminiscent of Col.

“In just two days from now, we will hold a mass in celebration of the arrival of a painting of the Twilight Cardinal, who lit the fires of correct faith in this town and in this world, and of Saint Myuri, who supports him. Come to this event.”

Most of the merchants seemed to accept that was what they had to do, but Lawrence was among some who looked upset.

And he knew well why the merchants shared that expression with him.

“Confess your sins to the church and pray, and God will offer protection for your trade.”

The young priest smiled with benevolence and spoke not with any irony or sarcasm but as though he was truly praying for the merchants' souls.

But when Lawrence imagined that, he broke out in an unpleasant sweat. He was not of a heretical faith that worshipped toads or anything like that. He was fine with the idea of bowing his head at the Church to get his money back. Faithful or not, he was a former merchant who had done this many times before.

But the problem was that he had many acquaintances in this town.

The majority of the people with clouded looks were likely local merchants. Nobody would be happy to be seen as an idiot by their trading partners.

Also, Holo had also been invited to the unveiling of the painting. When he imagined himself staggering forth for a confession in order to get the money back from a failed transaction that he had kept secret from her, he felt dizzy. He had no idea how much she was going to taunt him and how annoyed she would be with him.

Not only that, looking down at his foolish self would be none other than a painting of his daughter, Myuri, and the boy who may as well be his son, Col!

Lawrence did not listen to any of the details afterward and staggered out of the herring egg exchange.

He knew he had to do something about it, but he pretty much already had his answer. The money he had gambled was not enough to rock their foundation, but he could not have just thrown away several weeks' worth of hard work for his own pride given how hard Holo was working.

More importantly, just after he had decided he would give up on the gambling money and not go to the confession, he had no confidence in himself to hide it all from her. She had an unusually sharp intuition when it came to these things.

So instead of having her sniff it out and expose him, he would rather tell her himself.

That was all he could think of.

But... Lawrence groaned in a murmur.

Unlike gambling with dice, the herring egg exchange had a limit on its losses. If it went well, then he would strike it rich, but if it went badly, then the losses would not be too terrible.

He had no idea there would be a pitfall like this one...He almost wanted to curse God himself, but he was a little late in remembering that these sorts of things came with trade.

Lawrence stood frozen at the port, looking up to the sky, and sighed.

He wanted to drink until he blacked out.

Holo came home that day, wheat husks clinging to her hair and tail. Lawrence plucked the husks off her tail as she cheerfully told him about what had happened.

She gleefully hummed the working tunes she learned and did not seem to notice the fool and how he was acting strange, but that could not be the case. She must have realized and was acting normal regardless.

Unable to bear the pressure, Lawrence finally confessed when Holo turned her back to him, asking him to massage her shoulders.

But unlike times before, almost all the money he gambled away would come back to him, and there would be no enormous damages to their business in the future. The biggest loss would probably be how she would tease him when they placed orders.

And above all, he had made the bet for Holo's sake.

He did not have to explain it in detail for Holo to understand that right away.

That was why she did not raise her brows, or bare her fangs, or call him a fool.

Holo only sat cross-legged on the bed, staring at Lawrence with a quiet gaze as he sat searching his conscience on the floor.

Lawrence could only hang his head.

It was practically the same as training a dog.

“Honestly...I feel like I am scolding Myuri right now.”

When Holo spoke with a sigh, Lawrence finally lifted his head.

“I always say how much she is like you.”

Both he and Holo always fought over who the mischievous Myuri most resembled, and he now renewed his understanding of his own faults.

“I’m ashamed.”

Holo briefly glanced at Lawrence before giving another deep sigh.

She then slid off the bed and stood before him.

“You are the same as that restless, idiotic pup. *Sniff-sniff*, something smells good, better jump at it!”

Unable to deny it, Lawrence turned away in shame.

Holo then crept closer, so he had no choice but to look at her.

As her red eyes peered at him, he thoughtlessly marveled at how beautiful they were.

He would never want his daughter to see him like this.

Holo stood up and scratched her head. Her annoyed demeanor was not directed toward him but was entirely self-deprecating.

“Honestly, I cannot believe I fell for something like this.”

Holo tilted her head and gave one last big sigh.

Lawrence hung his head again, and she said, “But dogs have their own way of being useful.”

“Huh?”

He lifted his head, and she had extended a hand to him.

She was telling him to stand.

He gripped her hand and, with a puzzled look, stood.

“My work friends have been sighing over losing their jobs.”

“Work friends?”

When he asked, Holo’s ears flitted about, displeased.

“The mixing girls.”

“Oh, right...And?”

It might have had something to do with the herring egg exchange.

Holo folded her arms across her chest and said with an earnest look, “Some of us, like the dancing girl and me, have come to this town by chance, but most of them are poor girls from town. They are all good-natured and honest workers.”

“Right, okay.”

Holo did not often compliment others, so Lawrence was rather surprised.

“And...it seems we all have similar taste in males.”

When she said that, she looked away in disgust.

Now that she mentioned it, the old man who managed the girls’ work had said something similar. Most of the women had found themselves working as mixing girls because they had fallen in love with scoundrels.

“Anyway, I cannot ignore them. I was just thinking about talking to you about the place you mentioned.”

“...The...herring egg exchange?”

“Aye. The girls receive a good bit of work from them. They will find themselves in trouble if it was to shut down. It was chaos when we received the news.”

He looked at her to confirm, and she sighed and scratched the base of her ear.

“The cause is that whole commotion little Col and that fool Myuri started, no? If the girls lose their means of livelihood because of them, then I will be forced to give up the name of the wisewolf.”

Col had left on a journey to bring back correct faith into society, and Myuri

left right behind him. Myuri looked like she was admirably supporting Col in the Church's painting, but Lawrence doubted she would be okay with such a minor role, so he figured that she had a big responsibility for it, too.

In that case, it was their role as her parents to get rid of as many adverse effects as they could.

That was honest Holo's way of thinking.

"But I do not know much about the human world. That sort is your territory."

Holo was strict with Lawrence, calling him an idiot and whatnot, but she did trust in his core. A fire lit in his heart because that made him happy, and because it was a good chance for him to recover from disgrace.

"Can you tell me more?"

What Holo told him about were the stories of those who worked at the very bottom, something not a lot of people saw.

Those at the exchange likely had no intentions of ever learning how they were related to the mixing girls, and without a doubt, the people of the Church were the same. And so that meant they were also among the privileged, unable to see who was standing under them.

"What do you think? Could you be of help?"

When he looked at Holo, who had ended up connecting with people she had worked with for only such a short time and felt pain for, Lawrence's heart hurt as well.

But he placed his hands on her slim shoulders.

He might now be a clumsy bathhouse owner, but he was still a notorious merchant who had once even captivated a wolf who was called the wisewolf.

"I can."

Holo's face immediately beamed. There originally used to be a dark light in Holo's eyes, when she had spent her days without any thanks, forgotten in a village wheat field, thinking only of her home.

Lawrence had taken her hand and brought her on a big journey in order to

bring light into her beautiful red eyes.

He remembered how young he had been over a decade ago and said, "I'm a merchant. I'll earn my losses back."

He would also recover from getting involved in a stupid deal that only annoyed Holo.

Holo smiled, exasperated at his enthusiasm.

"You are the male I fell for. I should be embarrassed if you fell and got up for free."

Exactly.

And as long as he had what Holo had told him, it was entirely possible that they could deal with it.

"Well, then."

"Yeah," Lawrence said. "The one stupid thing I have to avoid is repentance in front of that picture of Myuri."

Holo burst out in laughter, raised a single eyebrow in annoyance, and then patted Lawrence on the back.

The first part of their groundwork would be laid down at none other than the herring egg exchange.

Lawrence wanted the Church to withdraw their decision, but it might turn out to be that most merchants would not like the thought of stirring up trouble with the Church. It was sensible to think that it was fine to let sleeping dogs lie as long as they got their betting money back.

On top of that, it had been a while since Lawrence had negotiated with a merchant, so with out-of-character nervousness, he made his way to the exchange.

"Are you in charge of this exchange?"

There were only a few merchants in the now-empty exchange, and among them was the man who had written down Lawrence's bet in the book.

"I have an idea regarding the Church's high-handedness."

The man's eyes widened when Lawrence spoke, and he grinned.

"It's nice to see someone with a backbone. Everyone else just shrugged and walked away...But in that case, the boss's over there. We're not an association or anything, so no one's really taking control, but...if he says anything, most merchants will listen."

The man was pointing to an aging merchant, the one who had dealt with the priests in a calm manner.

"He's a former big shot of the Ruvik Alliance. He's retired now, but he ran several long-distance transport ships at the height of his career, and people called him Governor-General."

The Ruvik Alliance was the world's largest trade association, and a dozen or so trading cities were a part of it.

While Lawrence was surprised that someone so important was in a place like this, the man now sat alone at a table, listlessly sipping his drink. He was almost like a pouting child who had his toy taken away.

Lawrence felt an affinity for his state.

He was surely a merchant deep at his core, someone who could not separate himself from the charm of trade even after retirement.

"Pardon me. May I?"

Lawrence approached the table and spoke out to him, and the man looked at him with quiet eyes.

"Do you have an idea to deal with this situation?"

He had good ears, and he did not look down on Lawrence.

He was happy to hear the genuine merchantlike response, one that asked him to speak so long as he proved useful.

"I've already tried a *gift*."

A former executive of a massive company would unsurprisingly suggest bribery right at the start.

"But the Church is right in the middle of enacting reform, so they cut me off.

That young man seems to think of himself as the Twilight *Archbishop*.”

He had no idea how badly this man had been burned by the greedy Church, but it was inconvenient enough that the miracle potion of money did not work when it needed to.

“They even turned down the idea of paying a tax. It seems like they really marched in here only because they thought it was a problem of faith. They’re closing down this fun playground.”

The governor-general sighed and cracked his neck.

“We have no choice but to bow our heads like we’ve been told and take our betting money elsewhere.”

“But once you show submission, the next time something happens, you will be hit even harder and weakened even more. They might cut in even wherever you end up running to.”

There was a church no matter what town anyone went to in the world, and whether it was a relationship between people or between organizations, once one side started to show a habit for losing, the other would just drag them along. That was why the beginning was so critical.

“I’ve already tried all the old tricks now—do you have any ideas?”

The man’s light-blue eyes turned to him.

Lawrence readily greeted his gaze straight on and said, “Of course. At the end of the day, the people of the Church also live in a decorous world.”

“Hmm?”

“There are others we should be working with.”

There were some places that someone who had once been called Governor-General never saw, all because of his high point of view.

As Lawrence laid out the proposal that he and Holo had worked out, the great, aging merchant’s face immediately tensed, and when Lawrence was finished, he smacked himself on the forehead.

“They say the darkest area is right under the lighthouse! In all my forty years

of trade, I've brought together the cargo handlers. But, right...there was still a gap between the company warehouse and the ship."

Even Lawrence, who was of a much lower standing than him, did not know about such piecework systems.

That was because they had spent all their days out of the presence of women, so of course they would not know of territory belonging only to them.

"After getting the mixing girls together and on our side, I would like to go negotiate with the Church along with a few other suggestions. We should have a fair chance of success, but does everyone else here agree?"

If all that came back to him was his betting money, Lawrence would not particularly care for the longevity of the exchange, but when he thought about saving the mixing girls Holo worked with, then his only option was to keep the exchange running.

"Wait. Let me do some quick math in my head...Right, it would be cheaper than paying taxes to the Church. The best thing is that we won't be bowing down to them. This is an excellent exchange, and not one begging for forgiveness. An exchange means talk of profit and loss, and talk of profit and loss means everyone will probably easily accept it, and I'll keep that lot from going on and on. They won't get to close down our playground!"

The governor-general stood and gallantly extended his hand like a man of the sea.

"I won't stop making money until the day I die. Are you the same?"

Lawrence grasped his hand and said, "My wife always tells me to give it a rest."

The governor-general grinned like a pirate, though his expression returned to a prim one just a moment later.

"But I think I want something to just give it a little more oomph. Whatever excuses we may have, it doesn't look like a fancy place of prayer in here."

Perhaps because of the strange excitement that came with betting exorbitant amounts of money, there were odd decorations all over the exchange.

The dried herring hanging from the ceiling was one of them, and there was the crest of the Church wrapped in fishing net hanging on the wall, and stylized wooden figurines of every patron saint they could think of—from the patron saint of sailors to the one of childbirth—were hammered into the wall.

And on the opposite wall was a black-and-white painting of a massive herring carrying eggs butting heads with a massive sardine. It looked like there was water splashing all around them, but on a closer look, it was obvious that it was silver coins. To put it modestly, it looked like a place to pray for victory in battle for a tribe.

But when Lawrence looked around at all of it, he had an idea.

It is all for the sake of the exchange.

“We might have to alter some things. For example...”

Merchants would not get up for free if they fell.

Once he was done filling in the various details with the governor-general, they called a meeting with all the forever-gambling merchants.

Lawrence immediately headed to the warehouses in the harbor, and they had a talk with the mixing girls who Holo had brought together. There was no way, of course, that they would turn down the idea. With an energy that put the cargo handlers to shame, they agreed.

But it would be dangerous if they proceeded without any recourses, so Lawrence devised another plan and made it the secret ingredient.

He would need Holo’s cooperation and the connections he had fostered at the bathhouse.

The following day, the merchants all made a line and headed for the church of Atiph.

The townspeople were busy getting ready for the special mass that would be happening the following day outside the church doors.

“Is the Father in?”

Leading the pack was the most dignified of all of them, the governor-general.

His beard and hair had been stiffened with egg whites, and he had changed into clothes of the highest quality, starched so much that touching them might cause them to crack. It would not be odd if he went straight to attend the royal court.

And it was the way he acted, too.

The worker the governor-general spoke to was shocked, almost dropping the gold plating with which he was decorating the church doors. “Inside,” was all he said and removed his hat, perhaps mistaking him for a noble.

But his eyes widened even more when he saw who followed after the swarm of merchants.

The inside of the church was also in the midst of preparations, with scaffolding built up here and there, artisans doing their work on it. They made their way straight through the busy scene, walking boldly into the nave.

Beneath the high ceiling, which seemed like it might suck them up into the air, right in the middle of a red carpet laid out on the aisle, stood the high-ranking priests, seemingly talking about where they would hang their new painting.

“Oh, it’s you...”

The one who turned around was the young priest who had been teased as the Twilight Archbishop.

He looked around at all the merchants, and his gaze turned into a stern one.

“If this is about yesterday, then everything is already settled. And we will not be misled by anything but the blessings of—”

He likely thought they had all come to bribe him again. As the young priest was about to ramble on, the governor-general raised a hand to stop him.

“No. We have been touched by your faith, Father, and we have opened our eyes. And so we have also decided that we would like to follow the scripture and act in accordance with God’s will.”

“...Which means?”

There came a clearing of the throat.

“Yes, God said that we must share what we have. And so we have decided that we will serve free meals at the exchange to all the more unfortunate who have a hand in the herring trade.”

The young priest raised his eyebrows and turned to look at the senior priests beside him.

“That is an admirable way of thinking, but...”

“Indeed, of course, I cannot ask you something so selfish as to keep the exchange open in this town for that alone. We will follow the holy decision that both you and the chapter have come to.”

But all the merchants had come silently to this meeting, so there was no way it could be nothing.

After the priests whispered to one another, the young priest spoke as their representative.

“Then why have you come?”

“We have come to lead the way for some lost lambs.”

“What?”

“These are the ones who have words for you.”

The merchants then stepped to either side, creating a path all the way to the entrance to the nave.

The priests looked down the path with quizzical expressions.

There stood the mixing girls in their short sleeves and with husks of wheat clinging to their arms.

“Father, do you ever wonder how the wheat from far away that ends up as your wafers gets to this town and goes into the oven?”

“Wheat...What?”

The priests, with their pale skin hardly ever touched by the sun and their thin, delicate fingers, as well as the well-dressed, intellectual young priest, of course, were all flustered. They had likely been learning Church law ever since they were children, so they had rarely ever come into contact with wider society.

“The grains are cut, stuffed into bags, carried by cart, packed into ships, and taken on a long, long road. But there are the unseen who fill in the gaps of that series of processes. Those are these girls. If these girls did not come diligently to mix the wheat every morning and night once it is stuffed into bags and put away in the warehouses, it would soon grow moldy, and disease would creep into the bread we eat every day.”

When the governor-general gave his message, the mixing girls all elegantly bowed. Such polite etiquette shone brilliantly against the worn-out clothing they wore.

“Father.” The governor-general stepped forward and kneeled before the priests.

His act, resembling a noble confessing his faith, looked like it belonged in a play at a festival.

“We certainly are greedy merchants. That is something I cannot deny. But these women are different. They support the livelihood of the people of this town from places unseen, and I believe they are the very ones who should be bathed in the light of God.”



“Er...um...?”

The priest gave a confused nod and turned to look at the women.

They were all grasping the Church crests before their chests. Their gazes were trained downward and they looked so devout, their actions stirring up sympathy to anyone watching.

“B-but, but so? I understand who they are, but how are they related to you? You...deal with herring eggs, right? Do they not mix wheat?”

When the priest asked, the eyes of the great merchant who was the governor-general glinted.

“Wheat is a seasonal item, which means there are times of the year in which they are not mixing wheat. Once they’ve delivered the wheat for winter sowing, do you know what they will be mixing instead?”

“Huh? N-no...”

The governor-general then said, “Herring eggs.”

That was the reason why Holo asked for Lawrence’s help after catching wind of the problem from the other girls. At the herring egg exchange, there were merchants who watched the bets until the very end, separate from the merchants who took part in it. It was because of these merchants, who collected the herring eggs, that the fishermen brought the herring to this town. And much like wheat, herring eggs could not simply sit in barrels and be okay.

Many merchants did not know that, and of course there was no way for the clergy to know that, since they had never eaten herring eggs before, which was why they so easily said they were going to close the exchange.

“There are two kinds of exchanges when it comes to herring eggs. That is simply because there are two kinds of herring eggs that are being dealt with.”

“O-oh?”

“First, the dried eggs. Sunny days are necessary to dry them, and the girls work hard every day to do just that as well as mixing and managing them—and that is why they never spoil.”

“O-oh...”

“Next, there are salted eggs. Herring eggs are used as bait to lure in sardines in the southern sea, and the salted ones bring in more bites than the dried ones. That is why those sell for a much higher price, but they are also a handful to manage. Imagine a large barrel full of salt water with herring eggs steeped in it. These frail girls take paddles much too big for them and mix them around countless times in one day. O, Father, please have mercy. They work so hard every day so that it is not just this town but all the people of the south who may have sardines on their humble dinner tables.”

The priest had nothing to interject against the governor-general’s fluid speech.

Then Lawrence, just as he had done in their meeting beforehand, made a slight signal with his hand.

One of the mixing girls who received his signal promptly dropped to her knees.

“If you pity us, then please lend us your hand so that the herring may find their way here to this town in the future...”

After her emotional plea, the rest of the girls kneeled on the spot, and they all chanted in chorus.

““Please have mercy on us...””

With the unfortunate girls pleading before them, the priests, who had turned the exchange into a scapegoat for the sake of asceticism and fairness, were at a loss for words. Without the exchange, all the transactions surrounding herring would also vanish from the town. Namely, it would be taking away the women’s livelihood.

But when Lawrence estimated that the hardheaded young priest would say, *What is evil is evil*, Lawrence leaned over and whispered to him.

“Father, a lake looks like it has clear water because all the dirt has thickly accumulated at the bottom.”

“Wh—?”

“They say that clear water will not breed fish.”

The governor-general whispered into his other ear.

“Again, we vow to offer meals to the poor...day workers like the mixing girls, for example; to redo the inside; and to turn the exchange into a place where we will never forget our faith. Of course”—the governor-general puffed out his chest—“we have heard your scolding, Father, and have awoken to our faiths. Proof of your skill as a priest will live on in the exchange for generations to come.”

One could not save up money in heaven, but one could save up one’s virtues. So even if they did not take a monetary bribe, a different sort of potion should be able to work on the priests—that was the plan that Lawrence had come up with.

But the priest’s mouth was pursed tightly shut and his face tense, wondering if there was something wrong about this. Perhaps he was being tricked by the merchants’ eloquence.

Just to make doubly sure, the governor-general pulled out a single piece of paper from his breast pocket and showed it to the priest.

“This is what we are planning on changing the inside to look like, by the way. We are hoping to have the figure standing here be you, Father.”

The priest’s eyes widened, and he almost unconsciously turned to look behind him.

What he was looking at were men, ropes wrapped around their bodies and suspended from the ceiling, trying to hang up a painting.

There was a sketch of a painting on the paper that the governor-general produced.

It was a very stereotypical religious image, like the painting of Col and Myuri that the church was planning on putting up.

There was a mountain of herring in the background, with the merchants and the mixing girls piously on their knees, praying. It was none other than the young priest who was leading the men and women on a path to heaven.

The governor-general calling the young priest the Twilight Archbishop was the correct indication.

Lawrence knew that well, since he had cared for Col since he was a child.

This young man was clearly trying to copy Col.

“What do you think, Father?”

The young priest snapped back to reality.

“Oh, uh...um...”

The young priest, now floundering, looked to the older priests for their judgment, but they had been taken up by other merchants discussing this and that. No one outclassed greedy merchants when it came to sweet-talking priests.

“Father?”

The governor-general asked a second time, and the young priest’s eyes darted from him to Lawrence and to the mixing girls.

And finally, he painfully closed his eyes.

“...I...understand...I will retract my orders. The exchange will remain open...”

When he said that, the mixing girls rejoiced more than anyone else; they stood and cheered.

The priest still seemed somewhat perplexed, but he could not take it back now.

And it was clear that his gaze was glued to the draft of the picture.

“B-by the way...”

“Yes?”

The priest spoke softly, losing his nerve beneath the governor-general’s kind smile.

“Will it obviously be me?”

It was hard to live a life entirely devoid of desire.

That was why Lawrence and merchants like him existed in this world.

“Of course.”

When the governor-general said that, he pulled the young priest into a detailed chat about the picture. It looked exactly like a snake catching a mouse, but Lawrence decided not to let that bother him.

It seemed like things had reached a settlement, so he gave a tired sigh of relief and made his way toward the entrance of the nave.

Both young and old, all the mixing girls held one another's hands in joy.

Then the dancing girl, having noticed Lawrence, slipped to the front with an alluring carriage and embraced Lawrence in a fully theatrical manner.

“Oh, master!”

When the familiar dancing girl hugged him, Lawrence smiled wryly.

Of course, since the dancing girl danced in Nyohhira, she knew plenty about Spice and Wolf.

She quickly let go and pulled him toward his real owner.

“Why do you look so embarrassed?”

Holo stood before him and said exactly what she had promised she would say.

The mixing girls around them seemed to be enjoying it.

“The money I bet is coming back. Of course I'm embarrassed.”

When Lawrence said that, Holo lifted the hem of her skirt and kicked Lawrence's legs.

It was a stock interaction between a strong-willed wife and a weak-willed husband that one often saw in street performances.

Lawrence smiled bitterly in response to the chuckling mixing girls, then took Holo and the dancing girl from the nave and to the aisle.

“But you really helped us out. Letting you write the outline for the whole show created something fantastic.”

Even though she had blended in completely with the other mixing girls not too long ago, her rustic clothes seemed just like a costume. She was a top-tier

dancer, which likely meant she was also a fantastic actress. High-class guests gathered at Nyohhira, so competition was fierce.

“It’s nothing. I’ve had to entertain plenty of the stiff type like that in Nyohhira. Line delivery and favorable actions are my forte.”

Unlike Holo, the dancing girl gave a sensual smile.

The dancing girl had taken on the governor-general’s lines, his behavior, as well as directing how the mixing girls should act, especially since they did not know how to pray at a church.

Just as wheat passed through the hands of many on its way from the fields to the table, this turnabout drama was also the result of the help of many.

“And you will introduce me to that bearded merchant, right? He seems to have quite the assets.”

“Yes, of course.”

And the dancing girl asked for a price herself. It was a transaction of a good merchant.

“I need to have him buy me ermine fur before I start work in the winter.”

When she said that, her profile looked like that of a hunter.

As Lawrence wore a taut smile, there was a tug on his sleeve.

“Dear.”

Holo, who was wearing a triangular headkerchief and had her sleeves rolled up to work as a mixing girl, looked exactly like a local working woman. The image of her like this was so fresh, he found himself falling for her a little again.

“I am a bit peckish.”

The dancing girl got the message, gave a small smile, and then returned to the nave in order to rejoin the other mixing girls.

Lawrence gave a small sigh, took Holo’s hand, and left the church as everyone was hurriedly working for the event tomorrow.

“Honestly, I swear, perhaps we have cleaned up a bit of Myuri and little Col’s mess now,” Holo said, stretching out both her arms as though her shoulders

were stiff, perhaps because she had been acting as a pure and faithful mixing girl.

“I didn’t end up losing the money I bet, so things are all settled,” Lawrence responded, squinting at the bright morning townscape before him.

“You never change...is what I would say, but ’twas what helped us this time.”

“I guess,” Lawrence responded and smiled.

An odd silence then fell between them.

Lawrence had realized that she had been acting strange for a little while now. Despite how she was blunt about many things, there were only an odd few she was reserved about.

But he found it cute when she was like this, so he pretended not to notice.

“Then should we grab a drink somewhere and head back to the room?” he proposed deliberately, and Holo’s head snapped up, as though she was returning to reality, and she gave a vague response of acknowledgment.

Lawrence stared at her and could not help but grin; Holo immediately widened her eyes.

“You are truly wicked!”

“Ha-ha, I don’t want to hear that from you.”

Lawrence laughed, and Holo violently smacked him on the arm.

She then grabbed his wrist and said, “And? What is it?”

She might get honestly angry with him if he teased her too much.

He obediently replied.

“They’re going to use you as a reference in the picture they’re painting for the exchange.”

Holo’s eyes widened, and her ears piqued, almost lifting up her headkerchief.

“I want you to praise my brainpower, since I was the one who suggested remodeling the exchange on a quick decision.”

He could not order a painting with his own money, but he could with others’.

There were plenty of massively rich people at that exchange who Lawrence barely held a candle to.

“And they said they’ll put me at the front of the praying merchants.”

When he said that, Holo stared at him blankly and almost missed a step on the stone staircase.

Lawrence hurriedly held her up before wrapping his arm around her back, tightening his arm as he spoke.

“They say that paintings painted with stucco will last for a hundred years. No matter how much time passes, if you come here in the future, you—”

Lawrence decided not to say the rest.

When Holo next came alone to this town to see the painting, Lawrence would not be alive.

There was no need to say that.

Instead, he said this:

“So, well, if there are any requests you want to make, now’s your chance.”

“...*Sniff*...O-oh?”

When Holo lifted her head, her eyes brimming with tears either from joy that they would both live on forever in a painting or perhaps because she thought about parting with Lawrence, he grinned at her.

“Like if you want your boobs to be bigger than Myuri’s picture.”

Holo, astonished, changed her expression in an instant like a magician and grabbed at Lawrence’s beard.

“You fool!”

Holo yelled out loud in front of the church as people came and went. Many immediately turned to stare at them, but when they saw a girl obviously dressed as a mixing girl arguing with an unpolished-looking merchant, it was a common sight for them. It was just a regular lovers’ quarrel—everyone returned to their work and their business.

Lawrence waited until they all looked away before turning back to the huffy

Holo.

“I’m going to have them paint me a little younger, actually,” he responded, rubbing his beard after Holo had tugged on it.

Holo twisted a brow in annoyance, moved her mouth reproachfully as though she was calling him an idiot, but she said nothing in the end.

She instead gave a tired sigh and took Lawrence’s hand.

“You will be like that until you die, I see.”

It was unclear if she was complimenting him or not, so Lawrence had no choice but to answer so: “*You’re* telling *me* that?”

“Hmph. I am like a stone that has traveled down a long river; I can get no rounder or smoother than I already am. There is nothing to fix here.”

“But you’ve found yourself in plenty of trouble clinging to food for that.”

“Pardon? You have no right to say that to me. You have gone to gambling again and hid it from me!”

“But it all turned out okay in the end, didn’t it? What’s so bad about that?”

“You fool, ’tis only because I was working as a mixing girl. Without me, you—”

Just as Holo was about to argue vehemently, Lawrence leaned over her and lifted her up on her side as though she was his new bride.

“Oh, right. Without you, I’d be dead in a ditch somewhere right about now, and I’d never want to travel alone ever again.”

Holo’s red eyes widened and stared at Lawrence.

And then, slowly, her expression softened.

“Fool.”

They were right in front of the church.

When Holo clung to Lawrence’s neck, the bell in the bell tower rang, signaling noontime, almost as though it were blessing them— “Oh, ’tis noon. I would like meat for lunch.”

Holo immediately returned to her normal self and said that.

“...What happened to my innocent bride?”

When Lawrence asked, Holo shrugged and motioned for him to put her down.

Even though he had lifted her up, fully acting like they were just married, Lawrence was disappointed at Holo’s cold response, but he still put her down without much choice.

She cracked her neck, as though her shoulders were stiff, and then smiled at him dauntlessly.

“I was just hoping for a feast that rivals a wedding celebration.”

The nightmares he had of budgeting when they exchanged their vows came back to haunt him.

He thought about how he was human, and she was a wolf.

It was clear who was in charge here.

“Two silvers, max.”

When Lawrence said that, Holo leaped to cling to his arm like a frivolous girl.

“No need to be so stingy. Your bets always go well in the end, do they not? Oh, is that why you brought up sardines before?”

Holo the Wisewolf was so sharp when it came to things like that.

“...Three silvers.”

“Five.”

She did not show any hint of willingness to compromise.

But her tail was flicking back and forth happily.

Lawrence looked up to the sun and sighed.

“Fine, five.”

“Mmm!”

Holo responded with gusto and stretched.

“’Tis why you are my favorite, dearest.”

She then kissed him on the cheek. It was pleasant, but that cost him five

silver.

All he could do was laugh it off as a bad bargain.

“I’m drinking, too. That’s five for both.”

“I’m sorry? You may drink with your payment.”

“Come on...”

As they conversed, Lawrence and Holo disappeared into the crowd. No matter how they were jostled about by the throng of people or how they hurled insults at each other, they still held on tightly to each other’s hands.

Their long-awaited journey had just begun.

That was an episode in a port town, under a clear sky and cool winds but with still a hint of summer left.

ANOTHER
BIRTHDAY
AND WOLF



ANOTHER BIRTHDAY AND WOLF

This is a story of when two beautiful wolves still lived deep in the steam-filled mountains of Nyohhira...



It was early spring, where the daytime was rather warm but the nighttime was still very cool.

All the bathhouses in the northern hot spring village of Nyohhira were relaxing—all their winter guests had gone home.

But there was one bathhouse that stood rather deep in the mountains that had its lights on quite late into the night.

There were many people squeezed in the great hall of Spice and Wolf. There were rather well-dressed merchants, as well as aging men who looked like monks at first glance. There was even a slew of beast-like mercenaries, scars decorating their cheeks—even in a place like Nyohhira, where all sorts of travelers gathered, it was still a diverse roster of people. What these people, hailing from different standings and walks of life, had in common was that they were easily relaxing together. They had spent the day soaking in the baths until the sun went down and were now sipping on wine to cool themselves off.

However, what they were enjoying was not only the alcohol.

They had gathered in that bathhouse that day in order to pass on their words of congratulations.

“If I may be so bold.”

All the guests lazing about in the great hall turned to look at the owner of the bathhouse, Lawrence. He had made his way up in the world as a traveling merchant, and this would be the start of his tenth year since opening the bathhouse. His demeanor had entirely transformed into that of a bathhouse master.

Following Lawrence into the center of the hall was Luward, who was like a beast with his close-cropped hair.

Luward was the leader of a valiant mercenary company that everyone in the northlands knew; he unwrapped a scarlet cloth that sat on his hands, and something small sat delicately in the middle.

He was the type to stand by his own opinion, even if he came face-to-face with God, but he knelt before Lawrence, who stood in front of the hearth, and held out both hands.

“...I am humbled.”

As Lawrence reached out to the small item laying atop the open scarlet cloth, he spoke with a rather joking tone. The wolflike mercenary grinned.

What Lawrence picked up was a golden coin.

The profile of a woman was carved on it. She had long hair and was looking down, a smile on her face and a fertile ear of wheat wrapped around her head.

It was a coin that Lawrence had had specially made, and it held no value beside the gold material it was fashioned from.

But this coin had a special meaning.

With a flood of emotions, Lawrence plugged the coin into a board placed above the hearth. There were several round spaces in it, meant for putting gold coins on display.



It had been meant as savings at first. If running the bathhouse did not go well, then he would use this to fund his return to peddling.

But the bathhouse had been a hit since opening day, growing livelier and livelier every year, and there were times they even had to turn away guests.

There had been ten spaces in total on that board. He had put a coin in every year.

And Lawrence had now filled every opening with gold coins.

“Congratulations,” Luward said with delight, holding back an impish smile, like he was Lawrence’s vassal.

All the guests gathered in the great hall offered their words of congratulations, and Lawrence responded as they did so.

“And now, let us drink to new departures!” the gracefully smiling woman from the coin yelled.

That was Holo, who was the centuries-old wisewolf who resided in wheat and had wolf ears and a tail and was also the one who had worked hand in hand with Lawrence to build this bathhouse.

Even Lawrence, who typically cautioned Holo for her drinking habits, did not fuss over the little things today.

Holo went straightaway to filling everyone’s mugs with wine, and Lawrence scooped her up like they were newlyweds.

Then, as their guests hooted at them and Holo tried desperately to keep her cup from spilling, Lawrence gave her a kiss on the cheek stronger than any drink.

Could others hear them from beyond the door—no, from beyond the window?

Col, the live-in helper at the bathhouse, smiled wryly in his quiet room at the commotion downstairs.

Everyone in the bathhouse was an old and familiar acquaintance of his, so he was not troubled by them making noise.

Someone had immediately brought out an instrument, and he could catch the notes of a brisk tune.

He had no doubt that they would all be hungover the following day, and the bathhouse would be full of groans.

“Can we go yet, Brother?”

There came a whine from someone before Col.

There was a girl sitting on a backless chair, facing away from him.

“All the food’ll be gone if we don’t go down quickly.”

She naughtily rocked the chair, not bothering to hide her impatience.

The face that looked back over her shoulder at him was exactly the same as that of her mother, Holo, who was making merry downstairs. The only difference was the strange color of her hair, which looked like flecks of silver mixed into ash, and the rascal-like energy about her.

“Myuri, starting today, you need to be much more careful about these things.”

“Whaaat...?”

“I’ve explained it to you countless times.”

When Col said that, Myuri made a big frown.

“Come now—face forward.”

Myuri reluctantly faced forward again, but her tension in her shoulders revealed her rebellion.

Myuri was the only daughter of the couple who Col worked for, and since they had been together since she was born, she was like a much-younger sister to him.

As Col combed her hair while she sulked, he donned a tired smile.

“Just like how the bathhouse is reaching its milestone tenth year this spring, you are reaching an important age this year, too, right?”

“...”

Myuri did not respond, nor did she turn around.

Instead, the fluffy tail and alert ears she inherited from her mother rustled slightly.

“All your barbarism comes to an end now. From now on, you will be counted among the other adult women.”

Once she reached the age of ten, she would soon have to start thinking about who she would marry, even if she was not a noble daughter. Even the most rambunctious of girls who ran through the wilderness waving sticks in their hands would have to learn cooking, embroidery, the order of chores, and how to care for a household.

Myuri and Col were in a separate room getting ready for Myuri’s celebratory debut as an adult. If her neighborhood boy playmates saw the clothes she was wearing now, they would fall on the floor laughing or stare at her in shock.

She wore a floofy skirt with generous amounts of fabric, accessories that crossed her body to keep everything in place with an exasperating number of ties, a coat on her shoulders with a great deal of decorative fabric, as well as a cape to show her chastity—nothing she would ever wear normally.

They were all high-quality products prepared by one of Lawrence’s old acquaintances for this day, and they were normally things one could never get unless one was the daughter of someone from a massive company or of a noble house.

But when it came to Myuri, she stuck her tongue out at such a girly look, completely sick of it, and getting it on her was challenge enough.

After calming her down, coaxing her, intimidating her, then finally somehow getting her to put it on, Col watched as she now wriggled restlessly in the chair, making its legs clatter.

“Myuri, sit with your legs closed.”

“...”

Her legs, which had been crossed underneath her skirt, ostentatiously shut.

When they told her about this day, Myuri had resisted like a chicken being

dragged into the kitchen, but when her mother, Holo, spoke to her, she started listening at least somewhat.

And they were now at the last step of preparations—caring for her hair.

As Col carefully brushed Myuri's hair, she started to restlessly tap her feet again.

Vexed, Col opened his mouth.

"Sit still just a little longer."

Myuri gave an exaggerated sigh, perhaps because she had resisted so much when putting on her clothes, and said, "Then tell me a fun story."

Myuri, who paid no mind to appearances, felt that having her hair brushed was boring and that nothing was more pointless.

Col prayed that part of her would change slowly and then compromised with the energetic girl for the moment.

"Then—"

"No lectures, okay?"

His plan to tell Myuri about God's teachings while he had her crumbled.

But if he put her in a worse mood than she already was, her entire debut would be for nothing.

"Very well. In that case..."

As Col searched for a topic, Myuri peered back over her shoulder to speak.

"Hey, what about when you came to the village?"

"When I came to the village?"

"I've heard stories of you and Mother and Father and your big adventure tons of times, but I realized I never heard much of what happened after," Myuri said, and there was something causing her unrest, since she had grabbed her skirt and was flapping it around. "This house didn't exist before you came, right? That's really weird when I think about it."

That made sense.

And downstairs was surely blooming with stories of the past.

“This house, let’s see...Mr. Lawrence saved up plenty of money, then Miss Holo found the water vein, and that’s when they built the house.”

“Was I there?”

There was no back on the chair, so she spoke while leaning against Col.

“Myuri, I can’t braid your hair...No, you weren’t there yet.”

He gently pushed her away, and she smiled ticklishly and wriggled about.

“For the first two years...Or no, maybe it was three years...I don’t remember very well, but we spent a while making preparations to build the bathhouse first.”

“Like digging holes?”

For some reason, small children liked to dig holes everywhere.

“That’s right. We dug holes for the support beams, drains to get the spring water coming through...I grew a little stronger from doing that.”

“You don’t look it, though.”

It was even more painful, since she did not look like she was teasing him.

Col gave a vague smile before continuing.

“I even laid stones for the floor. And I directed so many craftsmen...Oh, I remember now. Every day was so dizzyingly busy.”

Col played back the memories that had been buried in the motions of daily life, closing his eyes and smiling at how things were back then.

Myuri started swaying in discontent, thinking that she had been left behind.

“And then? What happened after that, Brother?”

“Oh, I’m sorry. After that, when the bathhouse was mostly finished, we invited a lot of people over and celebrated its opening. You know the sign hanging from the eaves, yes? That sign was still there back then.”

“Woow. Hey, was I there?”

It seemed that Myuri was curious about when her entrance might be, perhaps

because he was talking about a time she did not know about.

“Back then...? Ah, I suppose I could say you were there; you were still in Miss Holo’s tummy.”

“Huh?”

“You were given the name Myuri at the celebration of the completion of the bathhouse.”

When he said that, Myuri’s ears stood straight up.

“Really?!”

She whirled around with such vigor, the hair Col had been partitioning out to braid slipped from his hands.

He silently made her sit facing forward again before speaking.

“Yes. That is the name of one of Miss Holo’s very old friends, as well as the name of Mr. Luward’s mercenary company, which supported Mr. Lawrence on his travels. I remember the decision came quite easily.”

“Huh. Wow...Eh-heh-heh.”

Myuri was extremely happy to know the moment she was given her name. Her fluffy tail, peeking out from her skirt, was swaying back and forth.

“And then, and then? When was I born?”

“You were born...in winter that year. Oh yes...that’s right...”

“Hmm?”

Col faltered in his words and his braiding hands stopped; Myuri looked back at him dubiously.

What he saw behind his closed eyes were his memories of working in such a lively house.

“Hey, Brother, what’s wrong?”

She grabbed his hand and shook him, and Col came back to reality.

When he recalled what it was like at the time, the fretfulness he had felt then came back to life in his chest.

The very source of that feeling, Myuri, was looking up at him with wide, innocent eyes.

“...I don’t think I will ever forget the few years after you were born.”

“What? Ha-ha, really?”

Myuri showed a somewhat happy, somewhat bashful response.

Her birth certainly had been a joyous thing, and the bathhouse became even more splendid because of it.

Well, maybe *splendid* was too much of a roundabout way of putting it. If he was to choose a more accurate way of saying it, *on fire* was probably more accurate.

Myuri, who of course would never find out what it was like back then, looked at Col in pure happiness.

“Hey, Brother. What was I like when I was a baby? Mother told me that you looked after me.”

“Huh? Er...Well, yes, I did. Mr. Lawrence and Miss Holo had their hands full making sure the bathhouse ran smoothly, after all.”

“But no matter how much I try to, I don’t really remember much about back then...”

Myuri spoke with some disappointment.

She was always asking Col to play with her but was always turned down, and she ended up getting a scolding whenever she stuck her nose in things, so her response made sense, since it sounded like Col was actually playing with her for once, but she could not remember.

“What I remember is...like, this is weird, but just being trapped in a net. Or did I dream that?”

She tilted her head, and she seemed truly innocent. Now, with her beautiful clothes, brushed hair, and a bit of makeup, he could call her *adorable* without exaggeration.

She was slender to begin with, and her face was an exact double of Holo’s.

As she was now, she was a girl he could marry off without any embarrassment, but Col knew what she was like on the inside, so he simply gave a tired smile.

“It is not a dream.”

“It isn’t?”

Myuri asked back innocently, and Col, after an itchy feeling overcame him, responded.

“You were overflowing with energy...We had no idea what to do with you, so we put you in a net and hung it from the ceiling.”

“Huh...huh? What?!”

Myuri’s ears stood straight up and she pursed her lips.

“What the heck?! Why are you so mean, Brother?!”

“I am not mean. Oh, just remembering what it was like back then still makes my heart hurt...”

When she would only ever cry during her breastfeeding, Holo took care of her most of the time. Col watched after her when Holo’s and Lawrence’s hands were not enough, but baby Myuri was nothing but adorable.

If there was any hardship that he could probably regard as such at that time, it was that she had inherited ears and a tail from Holo, and since she could not easily hide them, since she was a baby, they simply had to keep her from sight.



But once she learned how to move around on her own and stand on her own two feet, that was where the cuteness stopped.

“That was your rampaging stage. You grabbed on to everything, threw everything, hit everything; you would vanish the moment we looked away, and we all went pale as we searched everywhere for you, only to find you happily snoozing in some completely unexpected place.”

“...”

When presented with acts of barbarism she did not remember, Myuri looked away, as though it had nothing to do with her.

“But when you were in your crib...you were plenty adorable. Like a puppy caught in a trap.”

Col seemed defeated into only laughing, and Myuri turned around to look at him, somewhat fidgety.

“Really?”

“You were so small then; your tail was as big as you were. It was so sweet seeing you curled up in your net, clinging to your fluffy tail and squirming about. Mr. Lawrence was always watching you in fascination, so Miss Holo scolded him. Now that I think about it, you stopped biting your tail at some point, didn’t you?”

Myuri at the time had a habit of biting, perhaps because she always wanted something in her mouth, so her tail was often damp with spit.

Myuri’s shoulders tensed and her face went red, perhaps because that was an embarrassing memory for her.

“I—I don’t do that. I’m not a baby anymore.”

“You’re right. You’ve grown.”

Ten years had passed since then. He had scolded her, and she had surprised him and made him laugh countless times. And the moment for this girl to debut as a grown woman had finally come. When he thought about how she might stop buzzing around him, always calling his name, he got a little sad.

Col mocked himself—with the way she was acting now, there was no need to worry about her being married off.

“Come now—I am almost finished braiding your hair. Face forward.”

There was a strange coolness to Myuri’s hair, and it scattered all over the place when he brushed it with his fingers.

It shone when brushed properly with a comb, so it was rather fun hair to braid.

He split her hair into three—left, right, and center—braided both the left and right sections, then braided it all again to do up the middle part.

This braiding style took some time, but the dancing girls who frequented the bathhouse had taught him how to do it.

When it was finished, everyone downstairs would stare wide-eyed.

Yet, the one whose hair was being braided did not seem to care herself.

“*Siiigh*...Am I gonna have to wear these clothes and this annoying hair all the time?”

Like a toddler wriggling in a net, Myuri wriggled more in the clothes that were now trying to tie her down.

“Not every day, of course, no. You will not be able to help with the bathhouse wearing clothes like this. But you will need to look and act more like a lady than you have been until now.”

“...”

Instead of saying anything, Myuri gave a deep sigh.

“You cannot always be a child.”

He was used to Myuri never knowing when to quit. While she made him worry, that was part of what made her so cute; he smiled as he started finishing off the braid.

“And when you think about getting married, there are things you will have to start getting used to.”

When he said that, Myuri spoke as she kicked her feet.

“I’m not gonna get married. Father said I didn’t have to.”

Lawrence had a weak spot for his only daughter, so he sometimes said things like that, and Holo would pinch his butt.

Col understood how Lawrence felt and smiled, almost agreeing with him, and then sighed.

“Yes, but that cannot happen. That is how society works.”

Like how ash would return to ash and dust would return to dust.

People must live according to the flow of the world that God had decided on.

“But I’d rather just stay with you.”

Myuri whined, sulking, and leaned onto Col again.

She depended on him and looked up to him, and Col of course adored her.

But it was also the truth that there was a hint of bitterness in his smile.

“Is that because you can be as selfish as you want when you’re with me?”

Myuri looked up to him from below his chin.

They were reproachful, dissatisfied eyes.

“No.”

Col shrugged, and Myuri rammed her head straight into Col’s chest.

Col accepted it with a smile and patted her on the head.

“What I hope for is for you to be with the person you think is the most precious to you and for you to live a happy life.”

“But that’s why—”

Just as Myuri was going to argue, Col gently hugged her from behind.

“If you act properly, you will have wonderful appeal. But you must polish a gem in order to have it shine. You must polish yourself a little more so that whoever it is you want to turn around and notice you, will.”

Myuri seemed even more dissatisfied. She got enjoyment out of running around the mountains with a piece of dried meat in her mouth, so perhaps she

did not understand him when he talked about these things.

But they were still incredibly important.

When he tapped Myuri's arm very carefully to make that clear, she suddenly stirred in his arms.

"Hey, does that mean you think so, too, Brother?"

"Hmm?"

When he asked in response, Myuri turned around to look at him.

She looked more mature than usual, perhaps because he was finished braiding her hair.

"Do you want to marry a girl with pretty clothes, too?"

It was a truly childish question, and Col smiled softly and responded to it.

"I want to be a priest in the future...But sure. I would like a girl who wears proper clothes and has a ladylike smile, instead of one who dresses like a bandit and wipes her nose on her sleeve."

Myuri stared at Col, as though she were a baby hearing words for the first time.

Then, once what he said reached her, she looked back at him with a rather docile expression.

Perhaps she finally understood?

As Col felt some relief, Myuri looked back at him again.

And this time with oddly more vigor.

"Fine, then I'll do that," she said and smiled.

It was unusual for her to listen on the first go, and that made Col happy.

"Do you understand?"

"Yeah."

Myuri's ears and tail flitted around, and Col showed her a smile in return.

"Now shall we go show everyone how you look as your new you?"

He patted her on the shoulder, and she stood, though uncomfortably.

She was truly beautiful with her braided hair and in her fantastic outfit.

“You look lovely.”

“Really?”

“Yes, of course.”

When he responded, she smiled brightly.

“Come now—it would be trouble if you fell, so grab on to me.”

Col held out his hand and Myuri softly took it, then immediately adjusted her hand.

She then squeezed hard.

“Hey, Brother?”

Myuri spoke just as the two were about to leave the room.

“What is it?”

Col looked to her when she called for him, but she simply smiled and said nothing.

“?” Col tilted his head, and Myuri grabbed his arm and opened the door.

“It’s nothing. I’m hungry, though!”

“Myuri, that is what you need to fix.”

Myuri turned around, stuck her tongue out impishly, then cackled.

Col sighed, but he did not hate it when she acted like that.

They made their way down the hall, and they could clearly hear the commotion coming from downstairs. There were voices celebrating a memorable landmark of the bathhouse that the former merchant and the wolf who was once extolled as the wisewolf had built. And now, a newly born lady was making her way down. As her pseudo-older brother, Col felt his heart brimming with happiness as he took her along by the hand.

But that was perhaps why he did not notice.

Myuri had a particular smile on her face as she walked beside Col.

“Brother, can you braid my hair again?”

He would not laugh and point out that she had so hated it not too long ago. Just as a pupa would suddenly transform into a butterfly one day, girls were also sudden creatures like that.

“Yes, of course.”

Myuri drew up her shoulders in happiness and leaned against him.

When they went downstairs and showed themselves, the already lively atmosphere in the great hall boiled over. As Myuri seemed more okay with being pampered than he’d thought, Col was simply happy to see her grow.

That was why, in the end, Col would not realize for some time.

This had been the birth of a new feeling inside the little wolf’s small heart.

And that silver wolf was cunning and meticulous.

“Brother?”

Myuri, who was being celebrated by everyone like a new bride, peered up at Col.

“What is it?”

Col responded defenselessly, and Myuri gave a smile that matched that of her mother, Holo.

“I’m a little self-conscious.”

Col, the lamb of God that he was, responded like a sheep.

“I am very proud to see you grow up.”

Myuri grinned mischievously.

Before Lawrence in tears over his daughter growing up; Holo cackling, already drunk; and Luward fawning over Myuri as though she were his own niece, Col genuinely thought that.

But smiling beside him was the daughter of the wisewolf.

The bathhouse had reached a milestone. Myuri had grown from a child to an

adult.

And days of a new sort of worry were just about to begin for Col.

AFTERWORD

Hello, it's me, Hasekura. I'm sorry it's been such a long time...I've been starting all my writing with that sentence almost every day now. I'm really sorry it's been such a long time...

A great writer once recommended that we write short stories every month or at other set intervals, because it will become a book before we know it, and I now truly feel like that was 100 percent accurate. It's a little strange—I had no idea I had written so much for this short story collection, either.

Also, this time I got to use some topics that I had been hoping to bring up but never really had the chance to, so I am happy. I am sure that anyone else who is interested in the Middle Ages has wondered about the story of the bees, as well as the original story in this book! The related articles on Wikipedia said that they were all thrown away in Europe, but they were such a valuable source of protein, so I really wondered if that was true, but I finally stumbled upon some literature that detailed how they were used. Well, to tell the truth, when I later did a search on related terms, I immediately found the answer on Yahoo! Answers, so I kind of became engrossed in a sense of emptiness...I keep telling myself that the joy of stumbling across something you want to learn about while reading through a thick book is something we can't experience through Internet searches!

By the way, the *Spice and Wolf* series has mostly been inspired by books about things north of the Pyrenees, but as of late, I have been reading books that are set more recently and farther south about the modern Mediterranean region, as well as about the Middle East. They are so full of things I don't know, and it is very interesting. I have not decided if Holo and company will be going to the desert, but I have been dreaming lately of maybe writing about it in a different series or something.

Also, I have been recently pushing forward with creating content in VR. That's the main reason why there haven't been any books coming out...

And the currently in-development project is also now being called *Spice and Wolf VR*! I have been making this by taking full advantage of my position as the original author, while also gaining the cooperation of everyone else involved. In addition to the original VR animated scenarios, there are also some mini games where you can pet Holo's tail.

Please feel free to search for it.

And so, now that I have filled up this page, I will be taking my leave for a time.

I hope to see you again in the next volume.

Isuna Hasekura

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